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By John Strange Winter

AUTHOR OF 'BOOTLES' BABY.'

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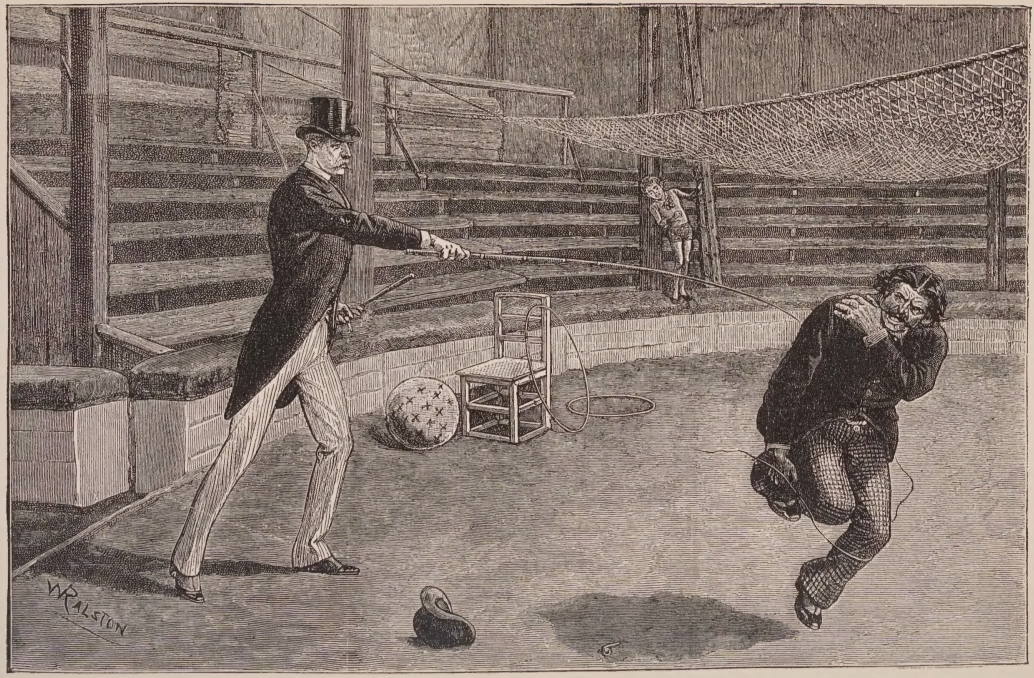

"YOU SHALL HAVE A TASTE OF YOUR OWN TREATMENT."

HOUP-LA.

BY

JOHN STRANGE WINTER,

AUTHOR OF "BOOTLES BABY," "CAVALRY LIFE,"
ETC. ETC.

ILLUSTRATED BY W. RALSTON.

"And followed his Master's fortunes into the Land of the Pharaohs."

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HOUP-LA.

CHAPTER I.

"THE SWELL FROM THE BARRICKS."

NOW, come, young shaver, look alive! At it again? Come, be quick; don't waste my time like this, or," with a threatening and significant quiver and crack of a long white whip, "it'll be worse for you. D'ye hear?"

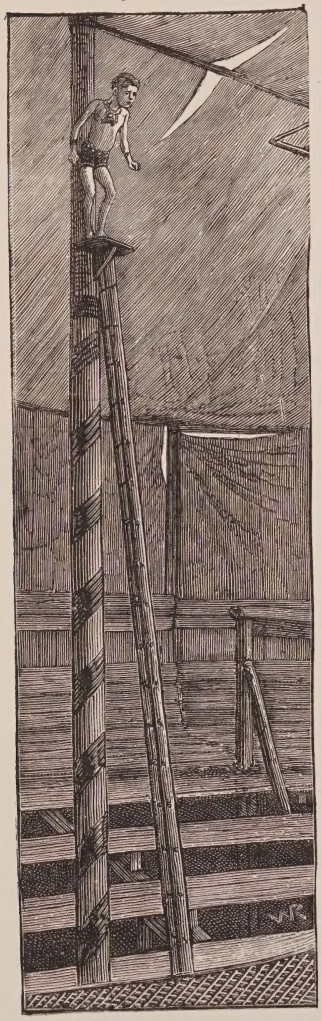
"Yes, yes, Mr. Frisco," in a shaking voice, and bracing himself up for another effort; then added in lower tones of utter desperation, "I *know* I'll *never* be able to do it."

"Be quick about it, then," the man called Frisco growled in brutal savageness. "I've spent more time over teaching you this, than all your cursed little body is worth. I believe you do it on purpose."

"No, I don't. I don't, Mr. Frisco," in an agony of appeal, and with a glance of terror at the white thong in the ring-master's strong and merciless hand.

"Ah, well, you'd better do it *this* time."

There was a moment of intense silence in the deserted circus ring, lighted only by one flaring gas jet, and such daylight as could flicker feebly through the ventilation apertures at the top of the tent.



The boy, an ill-fed, meagre-faced, under-sized lad of twelve years old or so, with thin trembling lips tightened by a life of misery and fear, and with big bright, blue eyes, unnaturally keen and quick, stood ready to mount the ladder leading to the several trapeze swings high up above their heads. Poor little chap, poor waif and stray, bound body and soul to the owners of a travelling circus! He had been many days now trying hard to achieve a difficult and dangerous trapeze leap, which was, in fact, utterly beyond the strength of his poor half-starved little body to perform. He knew he should never do it, he had tried hard—nay, his very best. That leap was never absent from his thoughts for a single instant during his waking hours, very seldom

from his dreams! Night after night he dreamt with horror of his morning's rush through the air, and of the failure of his little nervous fingers to catch the bar of the opposite swing, and many a time he sat up on his poor hard bed and hugged himself to make quite sure his body was still whole, and his bones unbroken.

"Come, up you go! How much more of my time are you going to waste?" shouted the ring-master, savagely.

So up he went, stood for a moment on the tiny platform high up aloft, a quivering, shuddering figure in a set of worn and ragged tights, looked desperately round, as if appealing for help to the rows and rows of empty ghost-like benches, clenched his hands hard for a moment, the nervous hands whose palms were hot and wet with the sweat of fear, wiped them hastily on his tight-clad thighs, took the leap, and, missing the bar, *fell.*

A fierce oath burst from the ring-master's lips as the lad fell with a dull thud into the net below. There was a quiver and a crack of the long white whip, followed by a piercing shriek as the boy rolled out of the netting on to the ground, and rushed for protection to the hated ladder, which was no protection at all from the cruel lash wielded by Frisco's strong and merciless arm.

"Up you go, no nonsense," he shouted. "Fail

this time, curse you, and you shall do the trick without the netting."

"I'll be killed," sobbed the boy.

"It's all you're worth! Up you go, I say, and be quick about it," and a crack of the whip gave point and accent to the words only too well understood by his wretched little victim.

So up he toiled once more, dashing the tears from his eyes as he climbed the cruel, and to him now, dizzy height, then he reached the platform again, and looked his fate hard in the face, as hard as the blinding tears, which came thick and fast over the big blue eyes, would let him.

If he failed this time, oh, what could save him then? He knew that the absence of the netting below would take all his nerve away, and that the leap to follow would be his last. If only he could manage to clutch that bar this time! If only his legs would not shake under him, and his hands tremble so! If only the tears which filled his eyes——

"Be quick," shouted the hoarse voice below him, and so, in haste, he took the leap, and *fell again!*

The white thong flew out again with a hiss, and curled once more round the tortured and quivering little body. Again the boy's piercing shrieks echoed through the gloomy circus tent.

"You shall do it without the net," the ring-

master shouted, flinging down his whip and flying to unfasten the cords which held it in place.

As the boy rolled down at his feet he kicked him aside, but the next instant he had measured his length upon the ground, and lay biting the filthy and trampled saw-dust of the ring.

"No, by Jove! that he does not, you infernal coward!" shouted a voice in his ears. "As I live, you shall have a taste of your own treatment. Get up!"

As the bully regained his feet the thong of his own whip whizzed through the air and caught him neatly in a double circle round the legs. Ay, not only round the legs, but fell again and again, in sharp cutting strokes, picking out deftly here and there every soft point of him, until his brawny body had pretty nearly every inch of it paid the dearest penalty of his cowardice.

At last he fell writhing to the ground again, shrieking, groaning, swearing, cursing, and vowing vengeance on the wretched little acrobat's avenger.

The new-comer stayed his arm, and drew the long white thong through his gloved left-hand, as if it had done good service, and he was grateful to it.

A long, lithe, handsome fellow he was—soldier all over him—well-set up and smart; neatly and plainly dressed, with no sign of ornament about him but a little pin of lapis-lazuli in his white

cotton cravat and a couple of diamond rings on the strong, bare, right hand, which held the stock of the whip. He was as cool as ice, too, and surveyed the writhing, spluttering bully on the ground with infinite amusement in his steady blue eyes, as blue as those of the astonished little acrobat beside the ladder, who kept dashing his tears away, and caught his still sobbing breath, as he gazed with awe and reverence on "the swell wot had wolloped Mr. Frisco"—the great and mighty Mr. Frisco, who, to his poor, benighted little mind, was the very embodiment of strength and power.

He knew that "the swell" in question was Captain Ferrers of the the Scarlet Lancers, then lying in Idleminster Barracks; he knew him quite well, for the officers had often patronised the circus during the few weeks the tent had been pitched in the city, and once Captain Ferrers had tipped him half-a-crown for an especially difficult feat he had performed on a bespeak night for the officers of the regiment.

It was true that Mr. Frisco had promptly taken the half-crown from him, but, all the same, that fact notwithstanding, the memory of the giver had ever since dwelt lovingly in his heart.

And behold! There was his benefactor quietly and caressingly drawing Mr. Frisco's white thong through his fingers, and smiling down upon that gentleman's writhing and quivering form, in a

way which would have made the lad laugh out loud, if he had dared to do it.

He wondered what "the swell from the barricks" would do next? And presently he saw and heard. "Here, stop that row," he said, authoritatively.

The lad rubbed his bruises and fairly chuckled; the ring-master continued his writhing and groaning, throwing in an oath here and there, by way of a little variation.

"Do you hear?" said Ferrers, raising his voice, "or do you *want* another taste of this? Get up!"

Very slowly and unwillingly the ring-master rose from the saw-dust laid ground, driven to it by the significant spread of the soldier's strong right arm.

"Are you this boy's father?" Ferrers demanded, curtly.

"No."

"Where is his father?"

"He's dead."

"And his mother?"

"She's dead too!"

"Ah!—and who looks after him?"

"I do" (very unwillingly).

"Oh! you do? Ah! Nice way you've got of doing it! Well, if you want him back again you can apply to the magistrates, and, mean-time, I shall give the police orders to look after you at once. Come along, my lad."

"He's my apprentice—he's bound to me," the

ring-master put in sullenly, as the boy crept round to his new friend and protector's side. At the same time he edged away from the reach of Ferrers' arm. "He has cost me pounds and pounds, and——"

"Yes. You can tell all that to the magistrates, you know," said the soldier, blandly. "By the way, have you any papers to show? Because, if you have, the magistrates will be glad to see them also. However, here is my card—though you know me well enough without it."

He made a gesture to the boy to go before him, and went out of the tent, still carrying the whip in his hand. Frisco shook his fist at his retreating figure, and growled out an oath or two, not loud—he was too fearful of rousing the lion again for that—but very deep.

There were generally a few loungers and ne'er-do-weels hanging about the circus tent, but not one of them had thought of going within to inquire into the cause of the shrieks and screams which all of them had heard quite as plainly as Captain Ferrers had done. They were accustomed to them—at least, such as belonged to the company were; it was only one of the youngsters getting an extra licking, and if Frisco was a bit hard on them, why, doubtless, Frisco had plenty of provocation. Anyway, it was no business of any one else's, and Frisco was a dangerous customer to interfere with.

Now, when the lad, followed by Ferrers, emerged from the tent, there were a dozen or so of them lounging against the railing, which served for entrance and advertisement board alike. They saw that the lad had been in for it again—he always did seem to be in for it, poor little toad—they fancied it must be, half of it, through sheer obstinacy, for he was an uncommonly clever lad at certain things, of which the snake performance was one.

One or two of the circus troupe looked up in rough pity, which was, however, quickly checked by the sight of the big soldier—well known to all of them—who came just behind him, carrying Frisco's better-known whip in his hand. Hollo! they wondered what was up now, and their wonder was certainly not decreased when Captain Ferrers hailed a passing cab, bade the boy get in, entered it himself, and was driven away in the direction of the barracks.

"That was Capting Ferrers," said one, "and he had Frisco's whip in his 'and."

"Been a-leathering o' Frisco, I should think," suggested another, but without the wildest idea that his words, uttered in jest, were as Gospel truth.

"'Ere he is to speak for 'isself. I'll ask 'im," laughed a third, who chanced to be too big to stand in any awe of the ringmaster. "'Ello, Frisco," he

remarked lightly, "'as the swell from the barricks been a-leathering of yer?"

Frisco muttered something quite unintelligible, and passed on, leaving the little group staring after him in profoundest surprise.

"You've 'it the right nail on the 'ead this time, old boy," exclaimed one at last, addressing the big young man who was not afraid of Frisco.

"Well, I'm blowed," said the big young man, blankly.

CHAPTER II.

"NOT IF I WAS TO SWING FOR IT."

THE little acrobat, in his worn and shabby tights, when Captain Ferrers told him to get into the cab, seated himself meekly and with fear and trembling, though with now and then a glance of passionate admiration and reverence at his deliverer on the opposite seat to him. He hardly knew what to think of him—certainly as something scarcely human, for humanity of Ferrers' type had never before dawned upon the, till now, changeless horizon of his sad life. He had never heard of God or of Heaven, except in such ways as did not give him idea of their blessed goodness and peace, he had never heard of the angels at all, or perhaps he might have likened Ferrers to one of them; but as it was, he simply in his unformed and ignorant mind thought of how he should like to be in a circus of which "the swell was boss."

The soldier guessed something of what was passing through his mind.

"Are you cold?" he asked in his kindly voice, the voice which had brought comfort to many and many an aching and weary heart.

The boy nodded. "Aye, sir," and shivered.

"Well, never mind, my lad, you shall be warm by-and-by. Oh! what's your name?"

"They call me Houp-La," the boy replied.

"Houp-La, ah! A very likely name for you. But what is your real name?"

"Tom Snow," hesitatingly, "leastways, that wos wot old Mrs. Wilson used to tell me my name wos."

"And who is Mrs. Wilson?"

"She's dead. She wos the lady wot kept the wardrobes."

Involuntarily the soldier's lips relaxed into a smile, and the boy struck in eagerly,—

"She wos werry good to me, wos old Mrs. Wilson. She wos a werry kind lady. Sometimes she used to give me my tea."

"And how long has she been dead?"

"Oh, a long time. I wos a little chap then."

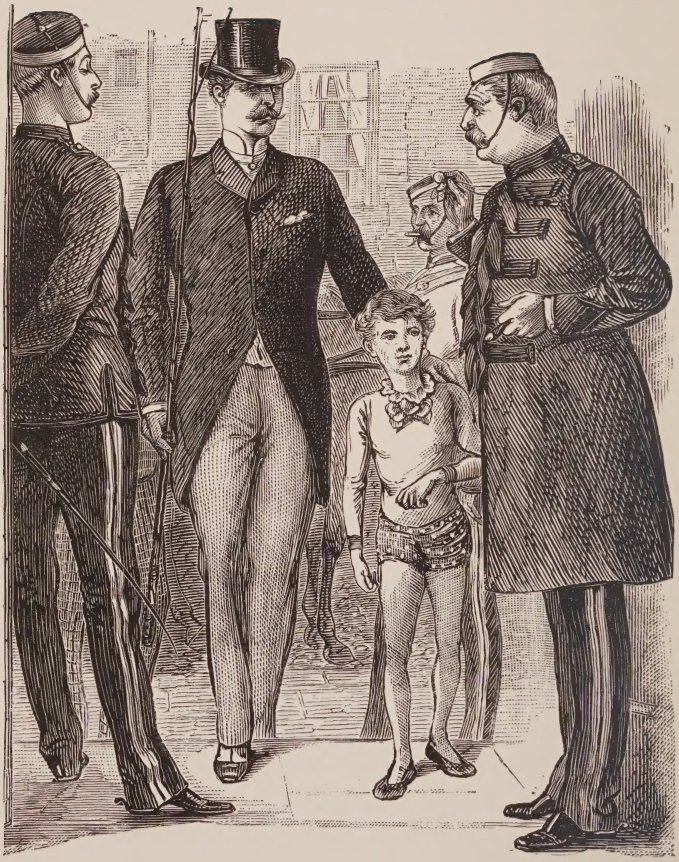
Ferrers smiled again. "You're not a very big one now, my boy. How old are you?"

"Twelve. Going on thirteen, sir."

"Ah!" Then, after a pause, "Can you read?"

The brown head was vigorously shaken, and the blue eyes stared widely at the question.

"Or write?"



"WHY, BOOTLES, WHAT ARE YOU UP TO NOW?"

The head was shaken again.

"No; but I can do the snake-trick and the wriggling-dodge — they're both werry difficult," eagerly.

Ferrers laughed. "Yes, I know. I've seen you do them both. Now here we are" as the cab stopped at the door of the officers' quarters. "Come with me."

There were several officers, some in uniform, and some in plain clothes, standing about the doorway who stared in surprise as Ferrers, followed by the little acrobat, alighted from the cab.

"Why, Bootles," cried one of them, "what are you up to now?"

"At it again?" asked another.

"Yes, at it again. I'll tell you all about it by-and by," said Bootles, good-naturedly, and disappeared with his strange companion.

"Why, it was young Houp-La from the circus," exclaimed Lucy. "I'm going after him—er—to see what it means."

He found the favourite of the regiment,—which Bootles was to a man, from commanding officer down to the last-joined subaltern and most lately-enlisted recruit,—sitting in a big chair before the fire watching the boy, who was crouched all of a heap on the bear-skin rug, luxuriating in the heat and warm light of the bright flames which blazed half-way up the chimney.

Bootles looked up. "Ah, is that you Lucy? Come in."

Lucy closed the door, and pushed the easiest chair he could find up to the fireside.

"Bootles," he said solemnly, "pwray, are you going to establish a Foundling—er—Hospital? Because, if your are—you had—er—better take my advice and make its head-quarters at Ferwrer's Court wrather than in Idleminster Barwracks."

Bootles laughed outright.

"You mean young Houp-La, there. Oh, he's all right; he's going under Terry's care. Don't trouble about him; he'll be in nobody's way, and Terry has been asking for help ever so long."

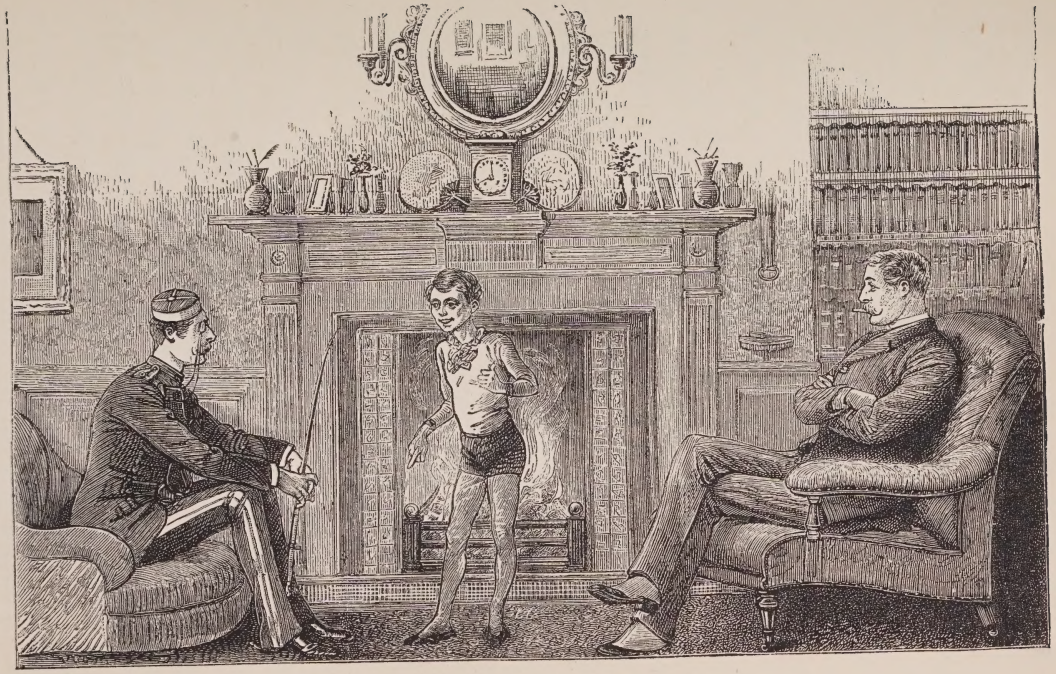
"Where did you pick him up?" asked Lucy.

"Down at the circus. That brute Frisco was teaching him a new trapeze trick, with the aid of that," pointing to the long white whip set up against the dressing table; "and I stopped him and brought young Houp-La away. That's all."

"Of course," Lucy murmured. "It goes without saying. And—er—how did the elegant Mr. Fwrisco come off?"

"'*E* wolloped 'im," put in young Houp-La, jerking his thumb towards Bootles, a whole world of delight shining in his bright and intelligent eyes,

"Ah! wolloped him, did he?" repeated Lucy with interest; "and what did Mr. Fwrisco say to that?"



"'E WOLLOPED 'IM."

"'Owled," answered the boy tersely, holding both his hands to the warmth of the fire. He had learnt one lesson, this little circus waif, and had learnt it thoroughly during the twelve hard years of his life, and that was to make a few words go a very long way. Both his hearers laughed, and then Lucy asked Bootles how it was that he had chanced to be in the circus at that time of day?

"Oh, I was going down to the club, and I happened to hear young Houp-La screaming as I passed. That was all about it," carelessly; "after all it is a very simple matter. He will be under Terry's charge—go to school, and make himself useful."

"I'm to be among the 'orses," explained the boy, suddenly finding his tongue, and turning his blazing eyes upon Lucy; "and I'm to have top-boots and a tall 'at, like Mr. Frisco, and go out with the kerridge. And, aye by——but it were good to see 'im this a'ternoon. 'E come in, and 'e see wot 'e were up to, and when 'e 'it out at me, the capting, 'e 'its out at 'im, and 'e sends 'im flying down in the sawdust—and then"—excitedly—"'e says, says 'e, 'Get up!' and 'e 'ad to get up, and then the Capting 'e give 'im proper. I never see such a wolloping! Mr. Frisco, 'e won't do no double somerset to-night—'e won't. And then"—getting on to his feet, and standing a small skinny figure, looking smaller than he really was,

by reason of the shabby old tights, worn and torn, with here and there a spangle still clinging to them —" and then, Mr. Frisco, 'e drops down at last, and 'e lies a-cussing and a-swearing like hurroar, and the Capting 'e says, 'D'ye *want* some more 'o this? Stop that 'ere row,' he says. 'D'ye 'ear?' I never see nothink so good afore," fairly chuckling. "With 'is own whip, too—that was the best of it."

"It does cut," continued young Houp-La, nodding at the white thong. "I know it well." Then his poor, pinched little face brightened up into positive radiance. "But the Capting ain't never going to let me go back to 'im—never no more."

"Here is Terry. Now you shall go along with him and have some dinner and a tub and some warm clothes. And mind, you're not to go outside the barrack gates. Do you hear?"

"Yes, sir;"—then added earnestly, and looking at his new master straight in the face—"Not if I wos to swing for it."

Bootles laughed, but stayed the lad a moment before Terry took him away.

"Look here, my boy. Do you know what a lie is?"

"Yes, sir. I do."

"Well, I want you to remember this. That whatever happens to you, whatever trouble you

may get into, you must never tell a lie by way of trying to save yourself. Lies always are found out sooner or later, and they never do any good at all to any one—never."

There was a moment's silence. Then the poor, miserable little waif fell down at Bootles' feet, and flung his arms round his knees.

"I'll never do nothing wot'll vex you," he cried, sobbing wildly. "I never will—not never—no, not if I was to swing for it."

"There, there, there!" said Bootles, patting the boy's brown head, that he might check this sudden outburst of passionate gratitude. "Now go along with Terry, and mind you do what he bids you. There, go along."

It occurred to both the officers at the same moment that he was by no means an ill-looking boy. True, he was undersized and meagre, and his face was pinched and white, the lips very tight and drawn.

But, though his face was tear-stained and the blue eyes blurred with violent weeping, he was not dirty. In fact, his nightly performances prevented any possibility of that, and he had always been considered one of the best-looking boys in the troupe.

"Poor little chap!" said Bootles, as the door closed behind the groom and the boy. "I'm glad I happened to be passing just then."

"Vewry lucky for him," murmured Lucy. "His fortune's made."

Bootles laughed. "Oh, nonsense! I've no doubt he will turn out a very smart groom; and, as I said just now, Terry has been needing help badly for a long time."

He then told Lucy all the details of the scene he had witnessed—how Frisco had sent the lad up the ladder twice, when it was evidently impossible he could perform the feat—how he had threatened to make him try it without the netting spread for protection below, and had even gone so far as to begin to undo the ropes which held it in place. Finally, how he had knocked him down, and then made him get up and take a regular sound hiding, just by way of letting him know what the cut of that particular whip was like.

"But I let the brute off too easily," Bootles wound up, regretfully. "I almost wish I had given him a little more."

"I don't suppose he does," laughed Lucy.

As soon as the door had closed behind them, Terry drew young Tom into the recess of the corridor window, and pulled a gaudy-coloured handkerchief, bearing a large portrait of *Cremorne* for its central attraction, and with rough kindness bade him dry his eyes and wipe his tear-stained cheeks.

"You'll find out, young 'un," he remarked, as

the boy began to follow his instructions—a task not altogether easy while his eyes were still swimming, and his poor pinched lips were quivering wofully—"you'll find the barricks ain't quite the same as what a circus is. 'Owling and blubbering may do for a circus, but they don't do anyhow for a barrick. You'll 'ave to learn to grin and bear it, wotever it is—and then you gets respected according-ly!"

"Yes, sir; I'll try my best," young Houp-La replied humbly, and with a glance of admiration at the groom almost as passionate in its intensity as those which he had cast at Captain Ferrers himself. Nor was the boy so far out of it in his judgment, for Terry was wearing an old suit of his master's clothes, and had the fine gentleman-cut about him, which you so often see in a groom when master and man are pretty much of a muchness in size and weight.

He laughed good-naturedly and patted the lad's shoulder.

"That's right, youngster; wot you've got to do is to show a good spirit at first—begin as you mean to go on is the best motter you can 'ave for life in the army. But, all the same, you needn't call me 'sir;' you'll call me Terry, like all the others. The officers you call 'sir,' as a matter o' course, and—and—the regimental"—this was a great concession of Terry's to the dignity of the

regimental sergeant-major, and came out distinctly with an effort. "You'll get to know 'im, bye-and-by," he went on, "and which is officers, but mind you don't take no impudence from none of the sergeants. They'll all try it on, a hectoring an' a-ordering of you; but you jest remember you're Capt'n Ferrers' boy, and you take no orders except from 'im an' me."

"I'll mind," answered the boy with rather more composure; then, after an instant's thought, asked suddenly, "An' if one of the swells asks me to fetch him aught, what then?"

"The officers is all friends of your master's," Terry explained, "and you oblige them according-*ly*, only they never goes a hectoring and a ordering in the same way them sergeants does. An' if they try it on, why, jest you let me know, and I'll soon make it right for you."

"Thank ye, sir—at least, I mean—T-Terry," the boy replied, correcting himself hastily, yet bringing the name out with a positive gasp of agony at addressing in such familiar fashion so distinguished a personage as Captain Ferrers' head groom.

"All right; then, come along," Terry rejoined, moving out of the recess.

As they reached the head of the stairs, however, they had to stand aside, for ascending them was Captain Ferrers' little adopted daughter, with her

nurse, returning from a walk. Young Tom stared with all his eyes, in speechless delight, at the golden-haired little fairy, in her rich dress of blue velvet and silver-fox fur; and Miss Mignon gazed with equal curiosity on the strange little figure by Terry's side, in the worn and shabby suit of tights.

The nurse would have passed on, but Miss Mignon—sweet little three-year-old damsel that she was—pulled up short; for she always made a rule of speaking to Terry, for whom she had a great respect, not to say devotion.

"Who have you gotted there, Terry?" she demanded. Miss Mignon was not shy, though she made all her verbs regular.

"Tom Snow his name is, Missy," Terry replied. "He's going to be among the Capt'n's 'orses."

Miss Mignon advanced a step nearer to the boy, and touched one of the few glittering spangles still remaining on his acrobat's dress.

"*What's* your name?" she demanded.

"Houp-La, Miss," he answered.

"Are you the wriggle-wriggle?" she questioned, imitating the celebrated snake-trick with her little hands.

The boy nodded, and his eyes brightened at this honourable mention of his best performance.

"Yes, Miss. I see you at the circus one night along o' Capting Ferrers. That was the night he

gave me the 'alf-crown," he added in an undertone, as if by way of reminder to himself.

"Yes, Bootles gived it you," said Mignon; then suddenly added, "You've been crying," in a tone of conviction there was no gainsaying.

Nor, in fact, did young Houp-La make the smallest attempt to gainsay it; on the contrary, he hung his head and admitted that such unhappily was the fact.

Miss Mignon desired to know the why and wherefore of his troubles, so forthwith the whole story, from beginning to end, was poured into her small but sympathetic ears. Finally, however, Terry reminded her that young Tom had had no dinner that day, and that he was very hungry.

"Good-bye, boy!" she cried. "I *do* like you;" and then, before either the nurse or Terry could stop it, flung her little arms round him, and held up her beautiful little face to kiss him.

There was a horrified exclamation from the guardian of either child; then the old nurse hastily caught Mignon up in her arms and ran away with her, while Terry hurried the boy downstairs into his master's kitchen.

There was a good, substantial, hot dinner, in a cover and plate, on one of the hobs, and Terry set the boy before the fire, as a preliminary to the enjoyment of it.

"Look 'ere, youngster, that sort o' thing won't

do," he said, seriously; "the Capt'n 'll be rare an' put out about it, if he gets to hear about it."

The little ragged and forlorn circus-waif stared at the groom for a moment, then, without a word, rose from his chair and made a rush for the door. Terry gave chase, but was too late—the agile circus boy, accustomed to running up ladders and swarming up ropes, was already half-way upstairs, and had burst into Ferrers' room before Terry had time to reach the corridor.

"Please, sir, I didn't go for to do it. I didn't, indeed," he broke out, in pleading accents; "an' Terry says as 'ow you'll be rare an' put out; but——"

"What's the matter?" Bootles inquired, patiently, while Lucy looked on with a rather "I-told-you-so" expression of amusement.

"The little lady give it to me, and I couldn't help it," the boy pleaded. "I didn't know it would vex you, sir."

"Does he mean Miss Mignon?" asked Bootles of Terry, who had entered the room and stood, red and uneasy, just within the door.

"Yes, sir," he answered.

"And what did Miss Mignon give you, my lad?" the officer asked kindly.

"She give me a kiss, sir," humbly. "She see me do the snake-trick at the circus, one night when she wos along o' you; an' she see as 'ow I had

been crying, an' then she asked me why, and I telled her. An' please, sir, I didn't know it would vex yer. It wosn't as if I'd took it."

"No, no, certainly not. I'm not angry, my boy. But Terry was quite right to tell you not to do it again. Miss Mignon is very little and she does not understand. There, go and get some dinner now, and mind what Terry tells you," and then Terry led the lad away.

When they were again alone, the two officers after a single glance at one another burst out into roars of smothered laughter.

"Finest thing I ever heard," cried Lucy, when he was able to speak.

"But 'tis a fine lad to come and tell me," Bootles answered; "and, I daresay," with a sigh, "that more kicks than half-pence *or* kisses have fallen to his share hitherto."

"Oh! no one could blame the boy," Lucy rejoined quietly.

CHAPTER III.

A NEW LIFE.

IT was surprising how soon young Houp-la, or Tom Snow, as he soon came to be called, settled down into his new life. He took to it as a young duck takes to water. Within a week he was wearing the darling ambition of his heart—that is, top-boots and a tall hat with a cockade—and had achieved as smart a salute and "yessir" as any groom in the regiment. Bootles declared he was the sharpest-witted boy he had ever known, at which, of course, neither Bootles nor anyone else wondered when his training was taken into consideration.

He was popular, too, with everybody, high and low. He worked hard at his lessons—he would do anything to please Terry — and he adored Bootles. All his master's belongings were sacred in his eyes, and his orders once given were as unalterable as the laws of the Medes and Persians. In Tom's eyes there was no officer in the regiment

—the regiment, nay in the whole of the service—whom he would admit to be as strong or as clever, as handsome or as rich, as his master; not one who could ride, or drive, or shoot, or do any mortal thing with the same degree of excellence to which the Capt'n could attain. Yes, he had very early dropped the "Capting," and now clipped the word as short as any soldier in the barracks. In fact, in Tom's eyes, Bootles, like the king, could do no wrong.

The winter months wore away, and by-and-bye the Scarlet Lancers were moved from Idleminster to Aldershot, when Tom numbered among his experiences a different kind of march to those which he had shared with the travelling waggons of the circus, for his master chose him to accompany Terry with his second charger, partly because he was an unusually light-weight, and partly because he wanted to keep him under his own eye.

By that time Tom was thoroughly *au fait* of all the ins and outs of barrack life, had learned to speak very much better than when Ferrers had rescued him out of Frisco's cruel hands; could already read a page fairly well, if the words were not too long, and could write his own name legibly by dint of sprawling his left leg well out and lolling some two inches of his tongue out of the mouth, which was not nearly so pinched and tight as it had been aforetime.

"Ah! he's all very smart and that just now," said Hartog one day to Bootles; "but wait a few months until the change has had time to work. He'll get fat, and then where will your nice smart lad be? Simply not worth his salt."

But Tom never did get fat, not even plump. He ate well and heartily, but though his lips grew less tight and his blue eyes rather less anxious and bright—less unnaturally bright, I should say—he never came to be anything but a skinny slip of a lad, with a pinched, pale face and a deadly sharp tongue, and he did not seem to grow at all. No one was sorry for that. Neither Bootles nor Terry wished him any taller or heavier. The lad himself boasted of his small size and weight. He had no further ambitions—he had, in fact, reached the summit of his hopes and desires. Captain Ferrers needed a light-weight about his horses, and very often a sharp groom about himself. Tom supplied both needs to a nicety. He had no desire to grow into a man, because he was perfectly happy as Captain Ferrers' boy. He had known rough weather, and now that he had got into a port which seemed only suited for small craft, he was not anxious to grow into a three-decker.

It was wonderful how happy the boy was. The young life, which before had been storm-tossed on the rough waters of cruelty and cowardly oppression, sailed now on the clear wavelets of a sun-

shine lighted land-locked bay—his heart, which had all his days, ever since the time he was a little wee bit bairn, toddling by the help of his mother's hand, been starved, except for the goodness shown him by the old lady "wot kep' the wardrobes" was now bursting with love—first for the Capt'n, and his little daughter, Miss Mignon, then for Mr. Lucy, then for Terry, the groom.

Of them all Miss Mignon held the place of honour. Never again did young Houp-La encourage the sweet familiarity, which had first won his empty heart.. The "Capt'n" had said that she was very young, and did not altogether understand, and that was enough. Young Tom understood now, and the "Capt'n" might trust him to the very end. Yet, there were a thousand little ways in which he could and did serve her—for instance, when Bootles bought her a smart little cob-pony, and the little lady appeared in riding-habit and hard felt hat; the grooming of that pony fell to Tom's share, and wasn't that pony a credit to him! No mistake about it. Not a horse in the barracks passed the great gates into the world with a coat more shining and satin-like—every buckle and bit of chain glittered like the sun on a midsummer's noon, and not a speck could be seen anywhere.

There were times when young Tom, on a big, raking chestnut, was chosen to follow his master and Miss Mignon—and there were other times

when he sat behind the tall dog-cart, and heard his little angel's prattle as she sat between her guardian and Mr. Lucy. Happy days were they. Sometimes the boy's heart was almost bursting with mingled love and pride, and yet, his manner was always the same stiff copy of Terry's, his sharp young face as solemn as if it had been cut out of a block of wood.

After the "Capt'n" and little Miss Mignon, Tom's heart had a great space for love of Mr. Lucy,—who always gave him the same gentle greeting, "Morning, Tom!"—while the greatest friend he had in the wide world was Terry, who stood firmly and resolutely between him and all the bullies in the regiment, and had more than once used his fists on Tom's behalf.

Thus more than two years passed away, and many changes came about in the Scarlet Lancers, such changes as do come about in a regiment during so long a space of time. A very graceful poet sings touchingly and tenderly upon that theme—

> "All are scattered now, and fled;
> Some are married, some are dead."

It was true of the Scarlet Lancers, as of the circle of life—and among the married ones was Bootles!

But the story of Bootles' love and marriage has been told elsewhere. It is enough to say here that

he married the widow of a brother-officer, a lady who had one little child, whom, for other reasons than for the mother's sake, Bootles loved as his own flesh. But though he married he did not leave the Service; he was, in fact, too thoroughly and really at heart a soldier to entertain that idea for a moment; and his wife, Mrs. Bootles, as all the Scarlet Lancers called her, was more than content to do whatever pleased her good and handsome husband best.

Lucy was still in the regiment; in command of a troop now, but otherwise unchanged. The same soft speech, the same gentle manners, the same kind heart—not married, but waiting, as he always said from the first he should wait, for Ferrers' little "Mignon." Terry was still Captain Ferrers' head groom, and Tom Snow had positively not grown an inch.

And then there arose throughout the length and breadth of the civilised world rumours that affairs were what the young subalterns in the Scarlet Lancers called, "Uncommonly groggy in the East;" and very soon, from being thus lightly and carelessly termed "very groggy," affairs in the East began to assume a very serious aspect—indeed, so serious, in truth, that they very soon resolved themselves into orders for that regiment to hold itself in readiness for active service.

Next came the news of the bombardment of

Alexandria, and then the Scarlet Lancers got their final orders, and the whole regiment was in a state of exultation and delight.

It is true that down in the very lowest depths of their hearts there lay many an anxious thought and care for those who must be left behind; many a doubt if the glory which might come was worth all the bloodshed and misery which it must cost; but on the surface the bearing of each and all was fearless and gay; hope rose uppermost, and cost was set aside as a thing of naught.

There was a vast amount of chaff over the first appearance of the new uniforms—the serge tunics, with their heavily-wadded spine protectors; the rough boots, with their ample leg bandages, and all the other paraphernalia ingeniously contrived to ward off the ill-effects of the treacherous Egyptian climate.

Lucy expressed himself as most highly delighted with his great goggle spectacles, and walked about the barrack-square wearing them for hours after they came into his possession—by way, he said, of getting used to the feeling of them.

CHAPTER IV.

OFF TO EGYPT.

THE Scarlet Lancers had been quartered at York for several months previous to receiving their orders for active service. From York they went by train to Southampton, there to embark for the land of the Pharaohs.

It is always a terrible business, the departure of troops for fresh quarters—terrible even when it is no worse or more heart-breaking a matter than a move from Aldershot to Norwich, or from Shorncliffe to Leeds. Even then there is something almost as saddening about it as the slow and measured tramp of feet to beat of muffled drum, when with arms reversed and boots turned backward in the stirrups, the last honours of the service are paid to those who have died in harness.

But on that last sad day, when home lay at one end of the journey and active service at the other—when in the immediate future, war stood out clear and grim and ghastly, with all her train of

attendant horrors and misery—when the gay and gallant regiment would march out to the cheery mocking strains of "The girl I left behind me," there was scarcely a really light heart to be found in the entire strength of the regiment; for though some few had the chance of winning honour and glory, all would run the risk of coming home again maimed and shattered, or perhaps, when the war should be over, to be the very flower of a great nation rotting in Egyptian soil.

The dim grey light of a dull misty morning rose slowly over the old city and showed the points and pinnacles of the tall grey towers of the Minster one by one against the murky sky. The narrow streets were quiet as the grave—the houses mostly closed as yet; but the wider road leading to Fulford and the barracks showed more signs of life, and the barrack square was all in the confusion and bustle of preparation for immediate departure.

"Poor old Bootles looks bad this morning," remarked Miles to Hartog, as Bootles clattered past them.

"Mrs. Bootles looks worse," answered Hartog briefly, choking down a lump in his throat, and thinking miserably of a dear little piquant face, with great dark-fringed violet eyes, to which he had bade farewell but yesterday.

"I haven't seen her — where is she?" Miles asked.

"Over in the Gray's quarters, and Mignon too," Hartog replied.

"I think I'll go over and say good-bye to her,' suggested the other.

"I think you had better do nothing of the sort," retorted Hartog, almost fiercely. "What do women want with you or I poking our noses into their trouble? Leave 'em alone and let them cry their cry out and comfort one another. They'll never remember that we didn't go to say good-bye to them."

"Perhaps not," Miles admitted.

Meantime, at Mrs. Gray's window, Mignon was standing eagerly watching every movement of her dear Bootles, while behind her sat her mother, equally eager, yet feeling almost too stunned and sick at the parting which every moment was bringing upon them, to be able to watch the scarlet-clad figures moving to and fro in the square beneath.

Mrs. Gray was not attempting to watch the square at all, but was busy finishing the packing of her husband's cabin-trunk, her face as white as Mrs. Bootles', and her tears falling plentifully among the odds and ends which she had gathered together for that husband's comfort. She had not that power of bearing agony in silence which Mrs. Ferrers possessed. Poor little, soft, tender-hearted soul, she had been in tears ever since the regiment

had had its orders, and even then she was bound to talk over her work.

"I don't know *what* poor Jack will do without his buttons; he's sure to lose them all," she said, in a tone of despair, and stifling a sob because "poor dear Mrs. Bootles was feeling it so badly." "He never could sew a button on, and he *always* loses his studs. What have you done, Mrs. Ferrers?"

Mrs. Bootles turned her head. "The boy can do it very nicely; he is very handy with his needle. I daresay if you ask him he will undertake to keep Captain Gray in comfort with his buttons."

"Oh! do you think he would? It would be such a load off my mind," Mrs. Gray cried. "Then I'll ask him, for Jack does fidget so if he gets one off."

"Bootles is coming up," announced Mignon, from her post of observation, at this moment.

An instant later he came, followed by Captain Gray; they had not known or guessed, these tender women-folk, that when the end came it would be so sudden, and it seemed to them as if the two men had scarcely entered the room before the band outside struck up its dreary strains of warning, and then—then there was a good-bye kiss from Bootles to his comrade's wife, a hoarse "You'll take care of each other," a long embrace

and a "God bless you, my darling," to Mignon, while to *her* nothing but a clasp of the strong and tender arms, as if naught in life or death should ever part them—and then—oh, God! oh, God!—there was only a wrenching of themselves away and the hurrying of the two men to the chargers held at the door below; and then it was all over, and that was the end.

It was no use for Mignon to repeat her piteous cry, "Bootles, Bootles;" no use for Mrs. Gray to try to hold her stalwart husband fast in her weak clinging arms; no use for Bootles' wife to stagger half way across the room and stand staring blankly at the closed door, with a piteous look in her eyes, like a stricken deer; it was all of no use, for the parting was over and they had gone.

It was then that little Mrs. Gray cast herself upon Mrs. Bootles' breast and had her cry out, while the eyes above her were dry and burning, unable to shed a single tear; and it was but a moment later that young Houp-La came in to say good-bye to his mistress and Miss Mignon. Mrs. Bootles was expecting him.

"Come here, my boy," she said kindly, her consideration for others overmastering her own distress of mind. "You know you are very young for this service."

"Yes, mum," said Houp-La, humbly.

"But I know you will do your very best to

make him comfortable"—and here she slipped a sovereign into his hand—"and often, when Miss Mignon and I are thinking of you all, we shall be sure that you for one are doing your very best."

Young Houp-La caught her hand and held it hard in both of his. "I will, mum," he said earnestly; "I will, mum; you may depend on me. I will, by ——," then checked himself and cast a quick look at the others, "I will, God help me," he ended passionately.

And then Bootles' wife drew the poor little circus-waif to her heart and bade God bless him, and Mignon came and laid her wet face against his, and whispered that she would be very kind to the stable cat and her kitten; and at last the boy went out and shut the door behind him, his heart well-nigh bursting and the tears running freely down his sharp young face.

"I never asked him about Jack's buttons," cried little Mrs. Gray, with a piteous sob, at which Bootles' wife burst into an uncontrollable fit of hysterical laughter, which ended in the relief of a storm of tears.

There was very little of bravado gaiety when the good ship *Clyde* slipped adown the Channel that night. Officers and men alike were very quiet, and Tom Snow crept softly in and out of the cabin shared by his master with Lucy and Hartog, and

laid out his mess-things with silent and reverent sympathy for the gravity on that master's face, for Bootles had not, as yet, got over the agony he felt as he encountered the yearning misery in his wife's beautiful eyes, and as Mignon's parting sobs fell upon his ears. In truth, it was one of the three most bitter days that ever cast their shadow over the brightness of his pleasant and sunny life.

For himself, young Tom had no feelings save those of the wildest exultation and delight. Until the last moment he had never dared to think it possible he could accompany his master on the expedition. Night after night he had watered his pillow with tears at the thought of being left behind, and then—well, of course he was very sorry for the cause, and he pulled as long a face over the misfortune as anybody, though the young monkey's heart was beating and throbbing with joy at the chance it gave him—and then, the very day before the regiment was to leave its quarters, Terry fell upon the stairs leading to one of the troop-rooms, and slipped his knee-cap.

Going was for him out of the question, and not to be thought of; in fact, nobody did think of it for a moment. And then Bootles had to cast about in order to find somebody suitable to fill Terry's place, for Terry, although he was in reality a groom, yet was accustomed to do much about his master's person.

"I'll take young Houp-La," he said suddenly to Mrs. Bootles, after he had gone over in his mind all the likely men he knew. "He knows just how to do for me as well as Terry does. I'll take him."

And so young Tom was rigged out in haste, and followed his master's fortunes into the land of the Pharaohs.

Bootles' choice proved to be a very wise selection. The voyage out was the most miserable time he had ever passed; true, he had at one period been more unhappy, but never had he known before what it was to really miss a dear daily presence out of his life, not one, but two—his wife and Mignon.

In every respect young Tom suited him; he knew just what he wanted, and just when he wanted it; he was great at holding his tongue, and never bothering his master with questions about this or that, as a strange servant must necessarily have done. He was intensely sympathetic to the sleepless pain in Captain Ferrers' eyes; and, after all, what sympathy is there which is so sweet as the sympathy of those who have known the extremes of pain and misery themselves? Young Tom, too, was sympathetic in silence.

Then, moreover, apart from his services to his master, he proved quite a host in himself by way of relieving the tedium and weariness

which the voyage was to the men, to whom every hour seemed the length of a day, every mile as long as a dozen. It is always hard to keep men amused and contented on board ship, particularly on board a troop-ship, where, with all ranks, life is a continuous fight for daily bread, to say nothing of comfort, from port to port.

It is a tedious and irksome enough time to the officers, who have the best accommodation which the ship affords; but for those who live between-decks, with but few papers and amusements and but a limited amount of beer and tobacco, why the words tedious and irksome do not in any way tend to convey anything like an adequate idea of what that life's weariness and *ennui* really is.

It was here that young Tom, from being only a sharp-tongued general favourite, suddenly grew, like Captain Garnet's head, as Lucy remarked one night when they were steaming past the African coast, into "a gwreat and—er—shining light," for with his master's permission and some help from the sailors, he got the tailor to make him up a set of clown's garments and furbished up all his old circus tricks with such right good will, that more than once he had the honour of appearing before the most distinguished officers on board the *Clyde*, pleasing them each and all so greatly, that when he took his white hat round for contributions to the fund for the wives and children who had

been left behind, he obtained so good a sum that Bootles, whose heart was tender to every man, who could in any way approach or share his feelings on that subject, made it up to the even and respectable amount of five pounds out of his own pocket.

CHAPTER V.

"AND THEN——"

AND then at last they steamed into the harbour of Alexandria, and the voyage was over—for some of them it was very near indeed to the close of the voyage of life.

But they never seemed to think of it; action was the order of the day, and dispiritedness and down-heartedness apparently had flown from their midst. All was energy and bustle—tall Lancers clanked along the half-ruined Eastern-looking streets, tramped in and out of the bazaars and *cafés*, laughing in good-natured British contempt at nearly everything they saw, grumbled in true British style at all discomforts, and swore roundly at the flies and the dust, hob-nobbed with sun-burnt tars from the ships of war in the harbour, and scattered everywhere the energetic signs of British rule and occupation.

"I say, Bill," said one strapping broad-shouldered red jacket to one of a group of his comrades

one night, "wasn't the chaplain preaching about the seven plagues of Egypt, the Sunday afore we left 'ome?"

"Ay!" responded Bill, sending a great cloud of smoke into the midst of a cloud of flies.

"Do you remember what they was?"

"Why," answered Bill, hesitatingly, "there was frogs, flies and lice—and darkness, and blood—that's four; and hail, and blains—I suppose they're boils, or wuss—and the loss of the first-born."

"By gum!" ejaculated the first, "but old Pharaoh must have 'ad some grit in him to stand all that. I wonder if they had any baccy in them days;" and then he, too, took a mighty draw at his big pipe, and let the flies in his immediate neighbourhood have the full benefit thereof, after which he spat contemptuously into the midst of the swarm by way of distinctly adding insult to injury.

The flies did not particularly seem to appreciate the attention, and they forthwith settled down upon Private John Wood, No. 741, as if they had a special mission from Arabi Pasha to determine the exact value of "grit," as "grit" goes, in the ranks of the British army.

"Blowed if ever I knew the like o' this," quoth Private John Wood, No. 741. "Why, old Pharaoh must have 'ad a hide like Beelzebub."

There was a moment's pause, during which Private John Wood made a regular slaughter of the innocents, and his comrades pulled hard at their pipes and filled the air around them with their smoke. At last Bill Jenkins, who had apparently been trying to recall the plagues of Egypt more accurately, spoke,—

"Talking o' Beelzebub," he remarked, "makes me think, somehow or other, of a story they used to tell in our little village at 'ome."

"Let's 'ave it, my lad," cried a voice out of the smoke. Bill could tell as good a story as any man in the regiment, and they all knew it.

"It wasn't a dozen miles out o' Scarborough," Bill Jenkins continued, "a sleepy little hole of a place, enough to drive a poor chap out of his mind to stop in it. Not as I did stop in it long, for father 'prenticed me to a joiner, and I soon took myself off and tramped to York, where I asked for the shilling an' got it.

"Well, there were some queer old folks in Dean Ella — mine were as quaint as you could well picture—but perhaps the queerest of any of 'em were an old couple called Steve and Betty Ayton.

"They weren't badly off—in fact they lived on their own bit of land and in their own little cottage, had a cow and a pig or two, and a few fowls and such like The cottage stood well back from the Scarboro' road, and you got to it by going through

a little green gate and along a garden. There was a hedge in front, a privet hedge—and I wish we 'ad one or two in this beast of a place—neat an' well-clipt, and sometimes the roses climbed right over it, and you could smell 'em a hundred yards away——ah!" with a sigh, "I wish we could smell 'em now."

There was many a sigh to greet this remark, many a brave heart flew back over weary miles of sand and thorns and raging sea to *her* or *them* down in the cottage where the roses clambered up to the roof, or just as fondly, bless them for it, to a bare and meagre room where "the missis and the kids" were "getting along," poor souls, on Government allowance and the wife's scanty earnings. One handsome blue-eyed lad broke out in a low whistle—

> "'Mid pleasures and palaces,
> Where e'er we may roam,
> Be it ever so humble,
> There's no place like home."

"Oh! go ahead, Bill," put in young Houp-La, impatiently, "wot's the good o' yowling over wot can't be helped? Let's have the story."

"Aye, let's have the story," said another voice, choking down a sigh.

"Well," Bill Jenkins continued, "every now and then an old woman used to come to Dean Ella with fish, every fortnight or three weeks, as often, I

daresay, as she could beg a lift for a mile or two to help her on the way. She was a friend of old Betty's was Marl Yeoman, and used to stop at the gate of the little cottage whenever she went by.

"'Betty!' she used to shout. 'Bet-ty! ar't in t' hoose?'

"If Betty were at 'ome, she would come to the door, and then old Marl would go down the garden and pay her a visit.

"Well, it was one winter, when I was quite a little chap—ten or eleven, or thereabouts—old Marl got a fit of the rheumatics, and didn't turn up for ever so long; but at last she got able to come, and as usual, stopped at the little green gate and shouted,

"'Betty, Bet-ty!'

"Betty appeared at the door, and called back, 'Ay!'

"So Marl went along in, and set her big basket down by the cottage-front.

"'Hoo's thy Steve?' she asked anxiously, for the old man had been ailing when she had been last in Dean Ella.

"'Has'n ta heerd?' Betty asked.

"'Heerd — noa — ah've heerd nowt,' Marl answered; but she guessed wot had happened.

"'Then coom thy ways in t' hoose, and ah 'll tell thee all aboot it,' Betty answered, shaking her head.

"Now you know, up in the north," said Bill, "they don't leave you fasting if you give a body a call. So old Betty she bustled about and set cheese, and cake, and beer, before the old girl; and then she drew a chair up along of her, and put her two 'ands on her knees.

"'An' ye've heerd nowt?' she asked.

"'Nowt!' answered old Marl.

"'Ah, weel, it was a sennight coom the morn, my Steve were ta'en main bad.'

"'Aye!' said Marl.

"'Well,' said Betty, 'he'd been oot and aboot, foddering t'coo and such like. And he cooms in ta t'hoose, and ah says, "Gang ta bed, honey, and ah'll mâk thee a treacle posset."'

"'And says he, "Ah will, ma lass," and so he did. And ah made it, and he yeat it.'

"'Well, a'ter a bit, ah went oop ta his bed-side, and ah says, "Hoo is't, noo, Steve?"'

"'And he says, "Wuss!"'

"'So ah says, "Mun ah mâk thee another treacle-posset."'

"'And he says, "Aye!" so ah made that and he yeat that.'

"'And by-and-bye, ah went tiv his bed-side again, and ah says, "Hoo is't noo, Steve?"'

"'And he says, "Wusser and wusser!"'

"'So ah says, "Mun, ah mâk thee *another* treacle-posset."'

"'And he says, "Aye!" so ah made *it* and he yeat *it*."'

"'But the day got on, and he didn't seem no easier, so ah said tiv 'un, "Mun, ah fetch thee a bit o' cheese and Chris—a—mass cake."'

"'And he says, "Aye!" so ah cut a coople of good loomps o' cake and cheese, and a moog o' beer—and he took it, and he yeat it, and he dee'd.'

"She broke off short here an' shook her head sadly, while old Marl wagged hers for company and moaned aloud.

"'Well—well,' old Betty wound up, piously, 'ah 've lost ma old man, but ah do hope he's gone to rest in Beelzebub's bo—som.'

"Marl called out aloud, 'Oh! noa, noa, Betty' thee means Ya—bram!"

"'Well — well,' Betty answered impatiently, 'mebbe ah do—*thee knows t'gentlefolks best.*'"

A roar of laughter greeted this, for it does not take much to raise a laugh from the company around a camp-fire. Young Houp-La, however, rather scoffed at it.

"Cap it with a better, my lad," cried a voice from the other side of the circle.

"I don't know as 'ow I couldn't," answered the boy, pertly. "A deal of queer things 'ave come in my way in my time."

"Mr. Frisco, for instance," laughed one.

"Aye, Mr. Frisco; an' queerer than him," retorted the boy, quickly. "Travelling about with a circus is different to travelling about with a regiment. Lor', I remember one orful joke. It was the summer but one afore the Capt'n took me, we wos over three months at Idleminster. D'ye know Idleminster?"

A murmur of dissent ran through the group; the Scarlet Lancers had never been there since the year Bill Jenkins joined it. He had only been a few months in the city.

"Well, it's a queer old place—very swell in parts, with some folks as comes to the circus dressed up like a party, and others—plenty of them—as haven't money enough to patronize the circus at all.

"We'd a very good time, for the 19th Lancers were in barricks then—and as they 'ad a circus of their own, they never could come often enough to get a lesson of us. And, of course, after all the officers came the gals, and after all the gals came the old women, who looked after 'em and saw they didn't get into no mischief.

"Well, old Mrs. Wilson wos alive then, she wos the lady wot kep' the wardrobes, and I was lodging with her then down a lane in the back part of the town—Hungate, its name wos. The nearest way to the circus wos down a narrow flagged passage a-tween two tall houses, called Stow Bow Lane—

and just next door or so wos a grocer's shop, kep' by a queer old chap—a Mr. Drew.

"Hew as a queer antikated snuffy old boy, wot had a prentice lad or two, an' did all the work 'isself—and often of a market-day, or a time like Christmas, the two lads would be a-running with their baskets and parcels all over the town.

"Well, in June they 'ave a grand gala in Idleminster, and everybody has their friends, and makes a great to-do about it. All the country folk for miles round comes in, and everybody gets a deal o' grub and stuff. Well, the eldest acrobat boy—fourteen he wos—wos a living with old Mrs. Wilson then, and Frisco kep' him scantier off than he did me even. Sometimes of a night he used to sit up in bed an' say, 'Oup-La, are yer hungry?' I always wos, but I never wos quite so bad orf as him.

"'Let's nip somethink,' he used to say; but I never would—*he* used to say becos I 'adn't no nerve. Seems to me though," young Houp-La wound up reflectively, "that when you've got a tiger a gnawing inside of yer, yer wants more nerve to keep orf it than yer does just to do it."

"Right you are, my lad," said Bill Jenkins, approvingly.

"Well, any how, I never did; I kep' orf *that*," the boy continued, "but one week we wos tried orful 'ard. It was this way. Old Mrs. Wilson, she used to get the brown-titus every now and

then, and this week she were laid up with it orful bad. Of a night Jim and me couldn't sleep for the wheezing and rattling in her lungs, or somewhere; and the boss stopped 'er pay, and so the pore old girl had naught to eat or live on but wot Frisco paid her for keeping Jim and me—and that wosn't much, I promise yer.

"At last, Jim, he says to me, 'Oup-La,' says e, 'I'm a-getting desperate.'

"Yes," said I; "and wot then?"

"'Wot then?' says 'e. 'Why, just this—as 'ow I means to bring in some decent prog for Mrs. Wilson an' us to-night, if I 'ave to swing for it.'

"He didn't say no more, and neither did I; but just at six o'clock, when old Drew's shop was pretty dark, and the old man tired from having customers in an' out all day, Jim washes hisself and makes hisself real smart an' tidy, slouches his cap well down over his eyes, blacks his eyebrows, and smugs his face over with chalk to hide his colour—for he was a light-coloured, rosy-cheeked un wos Jim—takes Mrs. Wilson's biggest basket and goes out.

"'I'll see wot he's up to,' says I to myself; so out I slips after him and follers him to old Drew's shop; and there, sure enough, was the old man set a-nodding on a tall stool, and not a sign of the prentices about. Jim opens the door and goes in as bold as brass, and sets his basket down on th chair in the front of the counter. Old Drew jumps

up, and stands a-rubbing of his 'ands as polite as if Jim were a lord. Oh! but it were fine," the boy added, chuckling at the remembrance. "It wos a very queer-shaped shop," he went on, after a minute, "long and narrer, and it had a rather high counter running right from the window to the other end; so if old Drew wanted to come to the door, he 'ad to go all the way round; and, as I said, when Jim went in he got up.

"'What can I do for you, my lad?' he asked, as civil as possible.

"I stood close by the door, which Jim had left open, so 's I could hear everything. Jim set his basket straight and considered.

"'Why, I want two pounds o' the best black tea, Mr. Drew,' said he, quite simple-like, and rattling some money in his 'and. He had threepence, I knew; but how they wos going to pay for two pound of the best black tea wos a puzzler to me—a regular clincher. But Jim took it all quite natural, and looked about the shop as if he'd been sent of a errand. 'Mixed black,' says he; 'and then!'

"I watched the old feller pottering about, as he put it up; then he 'ands it over to Jim, and Jim puts it in one corner of his basket, while old Drew marks the figure with a bit o' chalk on the counter. B——y, but it were fine!"—bursting with laughter at the recollection of it. "And then he rubs his

withered old hands together and gives his chalk a flourish. 'Well, my boy,' says he, 'and then?'

"'Why, 'alf a pound o' green tea; and then——' Jim answered, rattling his money.

"'And then?' says the old chap, as he chalked that down.

"'A couple o' pounds o' soap,' said Jim; 'and then—' and old Drew kept putting up and chalking down as fast as Jim could remember his order.

"'Three pound o' raisins'—'and then—'

"'Three pound o' currants'—'and then—'

"'Four pound o' best lump suggar'—'and then—'

"'Two pound o' candles'—'and then—'

"'Two tins o' tomatoes'—'and then'

"''Arf a pound o' candy peel'—'and then'

"'A pound o' sago'—'and then'

"'A pound o' maccaroni'—'and then'

"'A pound o' grated cheese'—'and then'

"'A two-pound Maderiz cake'—'and *then*—' and then the basket got full to the top, all but one little space. Jim pulled his brows together, as if he wos trying to remember, looked all round the shop. 'Oh!' says he, '*I* know—a 'alf-crown tin o' Ly-big—and *then*—'

"'And then, my lad?' says old Drew.

"I couldn't hardly get my breath, I wos so 'xcited," Houp-La continued graphically. "But Jim wos as cool as a cow-cumber, he just slipped

his 'and through the handle of the basket, and got it comfortably on to his arm.

"'And then, Mr. Drew,' says he, quite civil and pleasant-like, 'and *then*, why, THEN, Mr. Drew—*we'll run for 't.*'

"Old Drew did his level best. I lay he never raced round that ere counter and along that shop 'alf so quick in all his life afore; but when he got to the door and out on to the flags, Jim had 'ooked it, and there wosn't a blessed sign of him. I see Jim a-cutting down Stow Bow Lane, but I didn't hurry after him. I wanted to see what old Drew'd do. He stood a minute, as if he wos fair dumbfoundered, staring up the street and down the street; and then he goes back into his shop, and 'e says, says he, '*Damn!*' I 'ear him myself.

"As for me, I went along 'ome, and there I found Jim a-showing of his priggins to old Mrs. Wilson. He tell'd her a lady give him a sovereign for catching her little gal from being run over, and as 'ow he'd spent it all on her becos she was poorly. He tipped a wink at me to hold my row, for Mrs. Wilson wouldn't 'ave had none on 'em if she'd known. But she never did, she cried a bit, and called him a brave lad; and my, didn't we have a blow out that night, neither!"

"Then you didn't mind a-eating of 'em, 'Oupla?" one of the big lancers asked, "even though you do object to stealing, yourself."

Young Tom looked at him contemptuously.

"I'm only human, Bill Symes," he answered, "and if any little chap of eleven or so, who'd had a tiger in his inside for a week or more, and had to do a circus performance every night, could say no to a basket chuck full of good things, becos they'd been cribbed from an old fool who hadn't 'alf the sense of one o' these pore snivelling 'Gyptian fellers, why, him ain't me, that's all."

"I should think not," laughed one of the group. "Who cleared old Morrison's apple trees, eh, Bill Symes?" a hint which sent Bill Symes off into fits of laughter at the remembrance of an episode, which he was in the habit of looking back upon as one of the finest jokes that had ever chanced to fall in to his not uneventful life.

"What was that? And who was old Morrison?" somebody asked, out of the cloud of smoke *and* flies.

Bill Symes fairly shook again, and his chum bade him tell the story for the benefit of all who chose to hear.

"Let's 'ave it," cried one or two, so Bill Symes pulled himself together and began:—

"It was before me and Jim there,"—jerking his thumb in the direction of his comrade—"'ad ever a thought of taking the Queen's shilling (along with a good many other things that neither us nor the sergeant bargained for), when we was on the

big line between Newtown and Oldcastle, doing of navvy-work. Old Morrison was sort of Squire of the village. He was living near and had land running on either side of the line. One bit was a fruit orchard. Well, the old chap, it seems he prided himself on three of his apple trees, they was some particular sort he'd brought from foreign parts, and with these he used to take first prizes at all the flower shows in the county pretty nearly. They was little bits of trees, very bushy and neat-looking, and the apples just were—oh! my, just weren't they, rather yellow and shiny, and when your teeth bit into 'em the juice squirted out into your mouth like a little fountain—ah! it just makes my mouth water to think of 'em this minute. Well, old Morrison used to count these apples, there was nine on one tree and twenty-five on another, and eleven on the other—that was forty-five big, round, lovely, shiny lumps of delight, as they say on the children's sweetstuff. I looked at 'em a good many times, and one dinner hour I thought I'd try one, so I did. I can tell you it was worth 'ooking. I knew old Morrison had counted 'em, but I never thought he'd be so mean as to go and miss just one, but he did, and the next morning he put's up a board with a paper pasted on it—

'These fruit trees are private property,' it said, 'and the fruit upon them is all counted by the owner. Therefore, if

any of the navvies or workmen employed on the railway-works commit any theft on the said trees, the owner will at once report the matter to the manager and insist on the severest penalty.

'(Signed) 'W. MORRISON,
'*Lord of the Manor.*'

"You may guess," Bill Symes continued contemptuously, "that I cared very little about Mr. W. Morrison, Lord of the Manor, nor any body else and that bit about 'commit any theft' put my back up no end. So that day when I was a-eating of my dinner, I just thought somehow I'd like a little dessert to it. So I hopped over the fencing and I helped myself to a couple more of the yellow apples. I wasn't greedy nor wasteful, you mind—I didn't go taking 'em just to spite the old gentleman, only a couple to finish off my dinner with. But sure enough next morning there goes my old gentleman down to the manager and pretty well orders him to dismiss every man on the work. Of course, I don't know exactly what was said, but I think the boss give him a sort of polite hint to go to the devil—anyway next day there was the Lord of the Manor a-watching his blessed old apple-trees for hisself. I'd told Jim, there, about it by then, and we'd strolled round and 'ad our fill 'fore we turned in for the night. Jim was fonder of apples than I was, and I daresay we 'ad made the five-and-forty look rather foolish, but, all the same, there couldn't be no sort of need for the old gentleman to be

roaring and ramping around his trees like a raging lion or a lunatic, with a three-pronged pitchfork and a horsewhip—as if we cared for either of 'em," in huge contempt. "However, there he was, every dinner-time awaiting of us—and out of working-hours his keeper, or gardener, or watcher, all took turns to keep an eye on us. Well, 'twasn't in reason I was a-going to stand this—flesh and blood couldn't do it, and, of course, if I did clear the trees there would be no fun in doing it except when the old gentleman was on sentry-go hisself. But the days went on, and the obstinate old beggar never gave one a chance; he used to storm about and get on all sides of his precious apple-trees at once. And just as I was beginning to think I should *'ave* to try what sort of stuff the keeper or the gardener was made of, there came along such a broiling, blistering buster of a day that it was just too much for him to do his usual hour of ramping up and down. So what does he do but sits himself down at the foot of one of his trees and lays his horsewhip along of him, and sets his pitchfork up on end against the trunk of the opposite tree.

"Upon my word, I thought the old devil was shamming at first, but when I see a good big lively wasp walk right along his nose and sit quietly a-grooming of hisself at the end of it, why, I said to myself, it was about time to slip over

that fencing and fetch the rest of the apples, and as there wasn't any time to waste, I went at once. I cleared the three trees clean, but as I'd heard the old chap had got a flower-show on a week later, I just left him three, not on the trees, but a-stuck on the three prongs of his pitchfork. I'd nine left when I slipped back to Jim. I 'ad four, and he 'ad five; and, as luck would 'ave it, just as I chucked the last core into the beck, the old chap woke. And really for an old gentleman, what 'ad been brought up respectable, with one foot in the grave, so to speak, and accustomed to looking into his hat twice every Sunday that came round, the language he made use of, when he saw them three apples a-setting calmly and quietly on the three prongs of that 'ere pitchfork, was something simply *orful*. I never heard anything like it afore *or* since."

"Talking of Oldcastle," put in a very quiet, serious-looking man, when the general laugh which followed Bill Symes's story had subsided, "reminds me that I have a brother at Oldcastle. He was a pointsman at the big station, not that Oldcastle is such a big station, but I mean the biggest just round about. I've often," he added reflectively, "heard very rum sort of yarns from him."

"Go a-head," they cried, so the pointsman's brother plunged headlong into his story.

"There was one," the pointsman's brother went on—"a very rum sort of a yarn, and I'll tell you. You know Oldcastle is where the head offices of the Shoveshire Railway Company are, and there the directors meet when business is on. Well, one of the richest of the directors is an old chap called Gardapenny, Thomas Gardapenny. I believe he wasn't anything much to start with, a regular ranker in fact, and they did used to say in Oldcastle that there wasn't a bigger old miser to be found from one end of the world to the other—that he was a regular old screw—a skin flint.

"I don't know how my brother Jack got hold of that part of the story, but it goes that one morning when he come down to his breakfast, and it wouldn't be a very big 'un, on that you may depend, he found a letter lying on the table calling him to a director's meeting at Oldcastle, to take place at three o'clock in the afternoon—dinner at the station hotel at seven, and to view some new sidings and shops at ten the following morning. Now this wasn't over and above convenient to the old feller, for he'd be obliged to stop all night, and though he got his dinner and his fee, he didn't exactly see having to pay for a lodging.

"Not that he ever thought of stopping away, for, having a free pass over all the lines, his journey wouldn't cost anything, his grub, at least his dinner, would be thrown in, and there was his

fee—and, of course you know there's a fee (a guinea, I think, or perhaps two), for each director what goes to the meeting, and any don't turn up their shares are shared out among them that do; and they say in Oldcastle, that Thomas Gardapenny never missed a meeting in his life. However, that's as may be, anyway, on the day of the meeting he turned up sure enough, and he didn't forget to go to the dinner either, but, as one of the waiters at the hotel told Jack he ate enough for four men, and twice as much as anyone else at the table.

"After dinner, when there was no more to be got, he left the party, who had gone in for whisky-toddy and billiards, and set out in search of a night's lodging, for a bed at the hotel couldn't be got for less than three shillings, which was quite beyond his pocket—besides a director couldn't very well have the cheek to go asking for the cheapest room in the house.

"So having left the hotel, the old feller went along the station and wondered if a sofa in one of the waiting-rooms wouldn't suit his purpose as well as anything else, and be cheap an' handy into the bargain. Only folks 'ud be coming in and out, and most likely the rooms were locked up at a certain hour, and he'd have to be turned out into the cold. So he sauntered along the platform and stood at the end of it, a-looking about him. A

porter who see him told me about it—a tall, thin, old chap, with a long nose, and hungry eyes.

"And he wondered—the chap as told me said he see it in his face—what he should do next?

"Then, somehow or other, his attention was attracted to the pointsman's cabin, a little way down the line, which was a low, two-floored building, with a stable or a office at bottom, and the box up above. It had three sides, all of glass, and the old chap could see the glow of the stove and the light of a lamp quite fair, and every now and then a figure moving backwards and forwards. He must have thought it looked very snug and cosy, for he went a bit nearer and had a better look at it.

"Of course the ground floor was locked up, and all as dark as pitch, and the box up above was got at by a flight of wooden steps at the side. So old Gardapenny went softly up, and looking in at the door, which was 'alf glass, like the rest, see my brother Jack a-watching the indicator with his 'and on the switches.

"In a few minutes the train whizzed along the rails underneath them and entered the station, and then, when Jack had put his signals back to danger, he had a bit o' breathing-time, and turning round, saw the old chap standing in the doorway.

"'I'm one of the directors,' said he to Jack, stepping into the box. 'I suppose I can come in?'

To be sure, sir,' said Jack civil-like, for he knew old Gardapenny well by sight. 'Beg pardon, sir, as I didn't see you afore, 'ad to keep my eye on the indicators.'

"He bustled about and got the old chap a stool, and gave it a dusting before he set it in front of the stove, and, as he told me, was a-wondering all along if any complaints had been made against him, that one of the directors had come to look him up? However, the old feller sat himself down and warmed himself as if he hadn't seen a fire for a month, and I dessay he had found it pretty cool out on that platform.

"'Dear me!' says he; 'but you've got very comfortable quarters here, my man;' and he rubbed his withered, skinny, old 'ands together till they fairly cracked again.

"'Well, sir, they might be wurs, cert'in-ly,' Jack replied.

"'True, true. And how long are you on duty?'

"'Till eight in the morning, sir,' says Jack. 'I've just come on.'

"'Oh, indeed,' says the old feller; 'and are you always on of nights?'

"'No, sir,' says Jack. 'Week in, week out. Next week I'm on at day-times.'

"'Ah, indeed! Why, bless me!' says the old feller, 'you're very cosy and comfortable up here,

I'm sure. And you've got your supper, too. Now, what 'ave you got for supper?'

"Well, as Jack said to me afterwards, he thought to himself, 'this 'ere's a rum old cove;' but, of course, he was bound to be civil and pleasant-like, seeing that he was one of the directors, so he answers,

"'Well, sir, sometimes I 'ave one thing and sometimes another; but I've got a fairish appetite and I don't stint it. To-night I've some potted meat sandwiches, and I've a couple of heggs for my breakfast in the morning.'

"'Ah, very nice—very nice, indeed!' says the old chap; 'and then you get a glass of something warm, I dessay? He—he—he!'

"'No, sir,' Jack says, serious, 'I never drinks no strong stuff at all. When I got took on the line, I says to myself, "John Brown," says I, "if you're a-going to spend your life among them 'ere railway lines, the clearer you keep your 'ead the better." And not only for myself, you know, sir; a pointsman 'as a anxious time of it; a deal depends on 'im. Now, there's some of 'em, they gets on very well in a reg'lar way; but there comes a bit of a busy time—a press o' trains like, and then they flies to the drink to steady their brains, and ten to one there's three columns in the newspapers about the Scotch *ex*-press. No, sir,' says Jack, 'I let's the drink alone. I've never 'ad a accident, and I hope I never shall.'

"'I'm sure I hope so too, Brown,' says the old feller. 'Then you drink tea or coffee?'

"'Well, no, sir,' says Jack, 'and I don't do that either. Tea ain't no sort of stuff to do work on, and I ain't got the knack of making coffee; though my missis, who's a rare cook, through 'aving been kitchenmaid in a high family, treats me to it a'most every day. But it wants to be fresh made to be worth drinking, does coffee. So my missis, she just puts me in a good bottle of milk, an' I makes myself a basin of cocoa; and it's real wonderful how cocoa keeps you a-going.'

"'I should think so, Brown,' says the old joker; 'I should think so. And about what time,' says he, affable and careless-like, 'do you generally get it?'

"'Why, about now, sir,' Jack answers; 'you see this is a sparish bit.'

"'Then get it, Brown, get it—don't mind me in the least. I'll sit by your comfortable fire,' says he, 'and just watch you a bit. Don't mind me in the least.'

"'Glad of your comp'ny, sir,' says Jack, which he was, as a director was rather a rare sort of visitor to get up in his box.

"So Jack set to and boiled his cocoa, and the old feller watched him all the time.

"'Upon my word, it smells delicious—*de*-lic-ious, he exclaims. 'Will I take a cup, Brown?

Well, I don't mind if I do—just to taste it, eh? He—he—he!—ah!' and Jack swears he smacked his lips as if he was judging real port wine at three-and-sixpence a bottle, 'very good—ve-ry good indeed, Brown. And *what's* that? Potted meat sandwich, upon my word; that wife of yours spoils you, she does indeed! Well, I'll just taste it, it looks so good. Ah! *de*-licious, fit for a prince, Brown—fit for a prince.'

"Well, the end of it was that the old joker put about half Jack's supper out of sight, and then when the clock struck eleven, and several trains came in and went out, Jack had to keep his eye on his work.

"At last there came another sparish bit, and Jack pulled out a bucket and set it upside down for himself on the other side of the stove; and the old chap rubbed his knees and looked round with a satisfied air.

"'Upon my word,' says he, 'if there was anywhere to sleep, I'd stop here all night, just for the fun of the thing, you know. I suppose, now, you couldn't make me up a bed, could you?'

"Jack began to think the old chap about the very rummest joker ever he'd come across; but he kept his thoughts to himself, as a matter of course—not being minded to offend one of the directors.

"'Why, sir,' he says, apologetically, "if I'd a-known you had such a fancy, I could have done

well enough; but as it is, I can't leave the spot for five minutes together. Still, if you could put up with a bundle o' clean straw and a rug, I can get 'em from the stable behind in a twinkling.'

"'Nothing better; upon my word, you're a fine fellow, Brown,' says the old chap, joyfully; 'and I'll not forget you—I'll not forget you.'

"So Jack went along, and in two or three minutes came back with a rug over his arm and a bundle of clean straw on his shoulder. He spread 'em out in a corner and sat down on his bucket again.

"'You're a fine feller, Brown,' says old Gardapenny, a-rubbing of his hands; 'and I'll tell you what, we only want one thing to be down right comfortable—and that's a pipe of tobacco—eh—Brown?'

"Now, poor Jack had been dying to set his pipe alight ever since he 'ad finished his supper, therefore he grinned approvingly, expecting the old chap would out with his pouch; but he didn't—nothing of the kind.

"'I didn't bring one with me, Brown,' he says; 'and I suppose it's too late and too far to go into the town.'

"'It's a dirty night, sir,' Jack answers, 'and you'd best not be wandering over the lines in the dark; but if you accept a pipe out of mine, sir, why—you're right welcome to it.'

"'Like to accept it—why, you're the finest feller ever I come across,' says the old chap; and so they sat and smoked for an hour or more.

"'I'll not forget you, Brown,' were the last words the old feller said as he rolled himself in the rug on the soft bed of straw.

"Jack said he slept like a bairn or a top; trains thundered to and fro, Jack went about in his ordinary way minding his switches and mending his fire, but the old feller never moved nor stirred till about six in the morning, when Jack was boiling his heggs and the little box was full of the smell of cocoa.

"And then the old chap sat up and rubbed his eyes.

"'Breakfast! eh, Brown,' says he; 'and are you going to invite me?'

"'Why, sir, if you like to take a snack,' Jack said modestly—for as he'd only enough for himself he couldn't invite him to a reg'lar meal.

"'That I will. You're a right good feller, Brown,' says he, 'and I'll not forget you.'

"Well, he disposed of one of Jack's heggs, had a good share of his bread and butter, and a good 'alf of his cocoa. 'I do wish I could have a bit of a wash,' says he, as he brushed the crumbs off his wes'coat.

"'That's easy enough,' says Jack. So he got him his basin and some hot water out of the kettle, a bit of soap and a towel, and his own comb—for

Jack is a dandy sort of chap, and never likes to go through Oldcastle streets in his muck.

"So, having been fed, lodged, warmed, and cleaned, old Gardapenny cleared out of the signal box. 'You're a fine feller, Brown,' says he. 'I'll remember you, and you shall hear of me again.' And his last words was, 'I'll see you again before I leave.'

"Jack felt his fortune was made; he looked ahead and he saw himself pushed on, till he got to be manager or something, with as many hundreds a year as he got pounds a month—and, of course he looked to get a handsome tip.

"He went home to his missis, and after telling her all about it, instead of going to bed, got himself cleaned and rigged out in all his Sunday best. Then he went back to the station to see old Gardapenny off.

"At first he couldn't see a sign of him, then one of the porters put him up to it. 'He's a-reading of a paper, as somebody left behind,' this chap told him; 'I'll show you.' So Jack goes up to him.

"'Beg pardon, sir,' says he.

"'Hey, what?' says the old feller sharply.

"'You said you'd remember me, sir, and that you'd see me again afore you went,' Jack explained, as the whistle began to scream. 'I hope, sir, as you'll give——'

"'Now, look here,' says the old devil, with an

air of righteous indignation. 'You know very well that railway servants are absolutely forbidden to ask for or even to accept gratuities, and I've a right good mind to report you and get you dismissed the company's service—upon my soul, I have.'

"Then the train started, leaving Jack staring blankly after it. He thought of his trouble, his cocoa, his bread and butter, his hegg, of all his golden dreams—but he only said one word, and that was what young Houp-La said just now! They say Tommy Atkins can do a deal in that line, and I know from experience that a navvy can lick him to fits—but just you let on *now* to my brother Jack about old Thomas Gardapenny, and I'll lay long odds on his putting 'em both in the shade in about five minutes——" And just then there was a general move as the trumpets rang out on the night air, Private John Wood repeating his assertion as he went off to his tent that "old Pharaoh must 'ave 'ad a 'ide like Be-elzebub!"

THEY SETTLED ON LUCY AS IF HE WERE A TOOTHSOME MORSEL.

CHAPTER VI.

A SERVICE OF DANGER.

PRIVATE JOHN WOOD, No. 741, was not the only man in the Scarlet Lancers whose "grit" the flies took an opportunity of valuing. They settled down upon Lucy as if he were a sweet and toothsome morsel such as did not often come in their way, which probably was exactly the true state of the case.

But Bootles they left strangely alone—perhaps he took after Pharaoh of old. Any way, certain it is that he suffered less from the climate and its attendant plagues than any other officer in the regiment, and it was partly owing to this—at least it was entirely due to his habitually cool and self-possessed demeanour, which he could not have maintained had the flies pestered him as they did some of the others, Lucy, for instance—that one evening, a few days after they had left Alexandria and Ramleh behind them, when he was lying half asleep in his hammock, a thump-thump sounded

upon the wooden box which stood just outside the entrance to his tent.

"Yes—what is it?" he called out sleepily, then, as an orderly appeared in the doorway, asked, "Well, orderly, what is it?"

"The Colonel's compliments, sir, and he wishes to see you as soon as possible."

"Very well. Tell the Colonel, with my compliments, that I'll be with him immediately," he answered, and the orderly, saluting, disappeared.

With all haste he rolled out of the hammock, and straightened himself as regarded his hair and the fastenings of his undress jacket, buckled on his sword, and went off to the Colonel's quarters, in ignorance that young Tom Snow, who had been loafing outside the tent until his master should shout for him when it was time to dress for mess, and so had heard the message which the orderly had brought, was following him, and that, when Bootles went in, flung himself down upon the sandy ground in blissful disregard of any plague that might be lurking there, be it Egyptian or otherwise.

The sentry on duty outside the Colonel's tent, of course, noticed him, and uttered a facetious remark after the manner in which most of the Scarlet Lancers were accustomed to address the sharp-tongued, amusing little circus waif.

"'Ello, young Houp-La. What may you be a-doing of?"

"I ain't a-doing of nothing," retorted young Houp-La, civilly, "except a-waiting of my master, Capt'n Ferrers, who you see a-going into the Colonel's quarters jes' now."

The sentry laughed and wheeled round on his allotted twenty yards of sentry-go, never dreaming of ordering young Tom off, for he was generally considered in the regiment as a thing of naught, beyond the fact of his being a favourite *protegé* of Captain Ferrers.

So there he remained, and there, with his sharp young ears pressed close to a little discrepancy in the canvas, which protected the officer commanding the Scarlet Lancers from the night dews and damps, Tom Snow the circus-waif became cognizant of and acquainted with the details and particulars of one of the most important and dangerous missions, which was entrusted to or accepted by any one of the officers and men who carried Her Majesty's uniform into the land of the Pharaohs in the campaign of '82, and heard every word that passed between his master and the three grey-haired officers whom he found there.

It was not only a very difficult but a very dangerous errand which Captain Ferrers had been chosen to perform. The order was given in the simplest and most soldierly words, and so young Tom was able to gather its exact meaning as clearly as Bootles himself could do. In substance it was

to convey a certain paper, written in cypher, to the officer commanding a body of troops lying about five miles from the Scarlet Lancers' Camp, which was but a short distance from the town of Abu-Goum, held by a strong force of the rebels, under the command of Arabi himself.

To reach the other British camp the envoy must pass almost through the rebel lines, else he would find himself close under the walls of Abu-Goum on the one hand, or involved in the swamps which skirted the margin of Lake Goum on the other.

The General impressed upon Bootles the need for caution and despatch, as he entrusted the precious paper to his hands, not without first making him exactly acquainted with its contents in case of accident by the way; so that if the paper were damaged or rendered illegible, he might not reach the other camp in ignorance of his mission.

And young Tom heard it all—every word!

"It is a very dangerous and a very delicate mission, which you have been chosen to perform, Captain Ferrers," the General said to Bootles, when he had given him his last instructions.

"I am aware of it, sir," Bootles answered, "and am very grateful for the honour you have conferred on me in selecting me for it."

"*H*onner," repeated Tom, indignantly, to the Egyptian night air; "the mistress 'd think it no such *h*onner, I'll be bound. Oh! if only I could

stop it—if only I could stand out and say, 'Yer shan't go. I'll not 'ave it,' but I can't. Wot can a little chap like me do, who's nobody at all except the Capt'n's boy? Why couldn't they send some duffer as wouldn't be missed—there's plenty on 'em about? If only I was a man—I never wanted to be a man before, I was proud o' my littleness; but now—*now*—I'd give the world, if I had it, to be as big as my master. The world—aye, my life, for that matter! My life—*my life!*——"

His thoughts were abruptly broken, and he leant more eagerly forward to see what was passing within the tent. He saw the General give the precious paper to his master—saw that he placed it for safety in a small brown leather pocket-book—saw the hands of the others outstretched to him in silent farewell.

"Why shouldn't I give my life?" the waif asked himself. "The Capt'n 'ud make a big hole in the regiment, but who'd ever miss me? Terry and the 'orses, and may-be not even them. If I get back, well and good; if I don't," shrugging his shoulders, "it won't make a deal o' matter. Aye, I'll do it. I'd give my life for his, *and I will!*"

He saw, then, that his master bowed himself out of the General's presence in silence, and went hastily in the direction of his own tent; seeing it,

the circus-waif rose up from his post of observation and followed him swiftly.

When he reached Captain Ferrers' tent he found his master bending over a brass-bound box, which stood in one corner of it—a box which Tom knew contained his revolvers.

"Is that you, Tom?" he asked.

"Yessir," answered Tom, with a salute, and advancing into the middle of the tent.

"Take my flask round to the mess-tent and get it filled with brandy—and be quick."

"Yessir," said Tom.

He never hesitated an instant what he should do. He had seen, the moment he entered the tent, that on the chest which formed his master's table, Captain Ferrers' had laid down the brown leather pocket-book which contained the all-important dispatch.

Quick as thought Tom snatched it up with the flask and ran out; once outside, he threw the flask to the winds and made for the outposts.

It was not difficult for him to pass them; on the contrary, in truth, he simply threw himself flat upon his stomach, and, by means of the snake-trick on which he had so prided himself of old, wriggled past the various sentries with the stealth and noiselessness of an Indian scout. Having passed the last one, he took the pocket-book from between his teeth, where he had carried it for safety, and

folding the precious dispatch neatly to half its former size, consigned it to a little pocket within the breast of his scarlet and black striped waistcoat, one which had been put there by Captain Ferrers' orders, so that the lad might carry a few shillings in safety, and without fear of being relieved of it by pickpockets.

Then he threw the book away, and with a last look in the direction of the camp, turned his face towards the five miles of difficulty and danger which lay between him and the mission which he had taken upon himself—nay, which he had in reality stolen from him to whom it had been entrusted—difficult, because of the inky darkness of the night, and of his ignorance of the surrounding country (an ignorance which his master would greatly have lessened by means of a compass and a plan, two articles of which Tom had not thought), dangerous, because almost every yard of the way bristled with rebel muskets, every post and point was guarded and watched by vigilant rebel troops.

But the lad's brave spirit never failed him for an instant. He had not stood upon the trapeze platform and looked grim Death hard in the face to be of faint heart now, when he needed all his courage.

He never thought of the harm he might be doing, still less of the risk he was running—only that his master, the Captain, had been sent on this

errand of danger, and that he, owing to his small size and elasticity of joint and muscle, and the particular form of training which he had undergone in the circus, could easily go in safety where his master could not expect to escape detection, nay, when he very well knew his master could not escape with his life.

It was only for a moment that he stood looking back upon the camp, which sheltered all he loved on earth; he could hear the steady and measured tramp of the sentries close at hand; he could see the more distant lights. Then a mist of tears blurred the picture. He dashed his hand across his eyes, plunged in the darkness, and was gone.

CHAPTER VII.

UNDER ARREST.

MEANTIME Bootles having seen that his revolvers were in perfect order, set about dressing himself for his expedition. He discarded his spurs and sword, and, indeed, everything which might serve to attract attention to him or make him an object more easily discernible in the darkness of the night.

There were among other things lying upon the make-shift table, a tin of milk biscuits, a jar of potted game, and a bottle nearly full of sherry. He poured out a tumbler full of the wine, and hastily spread some of the potted game upon the biscuits, then continued his preparations, eating as he moved about the tent.

"What a long time that boy is," he thought, impatiently.

Tom was not usually so long about his master's errands, and his master, not unnaturally perhaps, wondered at his being so then, when there was so

much need for haste. However, he pulled on his long cloak, which covered him up from head to foot, and slipped a dark blue cloth polo cap upon his head—it was safer than to wear the gold-laced forage-cap of an officer.

And then, just as he was going to button his cloak, he remembered the pocket-book, and turned to take it.

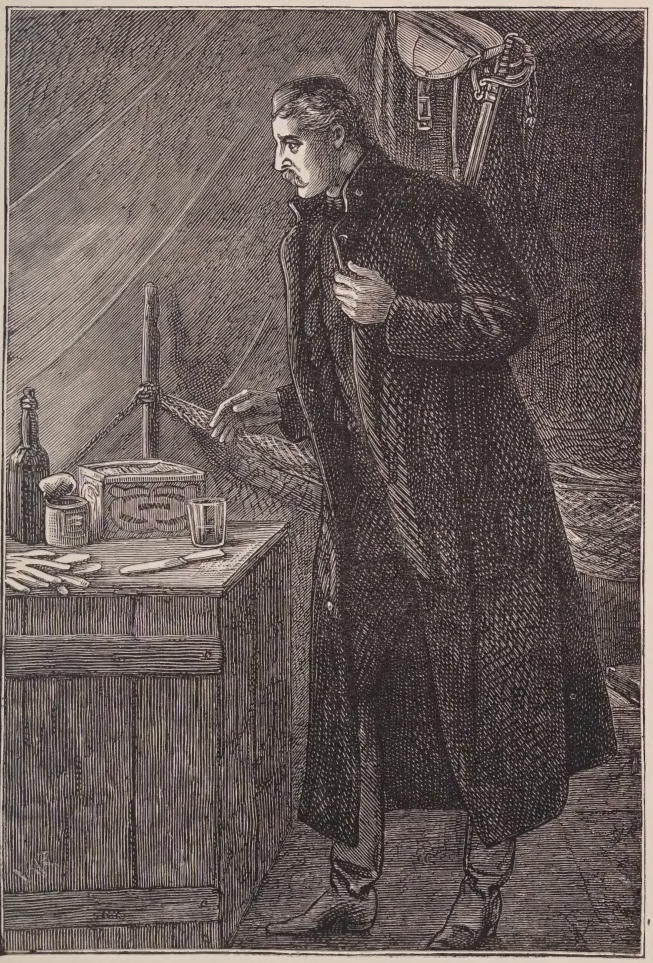
But it was gone!

Bootles stood for a moment staring at the place where he had laid it down in the stupefaction of intense surprise. He had put it down *just there*, beside his flask, and with his gloves! He was certain of it—he could positively swear to it.

What the devil had got the thing?

He roused himself from his bewilderment, and turned all his pockets out, ran to the brass-bound revolver case and examined that; back to the table, and tossed everything that was upon it over and over. Made quite sure, in fact, that pocket-book and despatch were alike missing and not to be found.

He felt it was no use staying there, wasting his precious time in ransacking boxes and turning out pockets which he had not touched that day. The Colonel must be told at once; so, with a mighty effort, Bootles pulled himself together, and went out with a sinking heart to tell the tale of his own shame and dishonour.



THE POCKET BOOK WAS GONE.

For thus did he in the agony and distress of mind which overwhelmed him, designate the carelessness or the unsuspiciousness, which had allowed him to trust the honesty of others. He never, for a moment, suspected young Tom of being the thief, but he did think it just within the bounds of possibility that while he had been bending down over the case of revolvers, some one had quietly crept in and carried off the pocket-book.

But it came out after a while—after Bootles had got through that terrible interview with the Colonel—terrible because of the pain it gave to both of them—after he had given up his sword and his parole of honour, and then had passed the night in his tent alone, lying miserably in his hammock with his arm flung across his eyes. Then it all came out! How his flask, a handsome silver thing, with crest and monogram emblazoned upon it, had been found as soon as morning light broke over the camp, not twenty yards away from his tent, how young Tom had never been at all to get the brandy for which his master had sent him, then how young Tom was missing, and had never been seen by any one in the camp since the sentry on duty outside the Colonel's tent had accosted him with "Ello, young 'Oup La, and what may you be a-doing of?" Lastly—and worst confirmation of all—how the missing pocket-book had been found just outside the most advanced outposts.

There could be no further doubt that Tom Snow was the delinquent—nobody had the slightest doubt about it, not even Bootles himself, though he stoutly declared his belief in the lad, and maintained that nothing could make him think young Tom was a traitor, except the most absolute and positive proof that such was the case. For once Lucy was absolutely angry with his best friend.

"My dear chap," he said, in tones which were distinctly tones of remonstrance, though he tried to make them those of calm reasonableness, "what—er—more pwroof *can* you want or have? The boy was sent to get your flask filled with bwrandy; he did not get it filled with bwrandy or anything else, but it is found instead only a few yards fwrom your own tent. The boy is gone—the—er—despatch is gone too. Nobody else in the whole camp is missing. It is wreally, Bootles, perfectly absurd to twry to shield the young devil any longer. The despatch—er—could not go by itself—it's absurd—it—er—isn't in wreason."

"In reason or out of reason, I don't and won't believe that the boy has sold me," Bootles asserted obstinately.

"But he has stolen the despatch," Lucy persisted.

"Oh, nonsense! What on earth should he do with it when he had got it?"

"Why, hand it over to Awrabi, of course.

What else should he do with it?" retorted Lucy sharply.

"Oh, he has never done that, though some one else may. That is likely enough," answered Bootles carelessly.

But Bootles knew very well in his heart that it must have been Tom and no other who had taken the pocket-book from off his table, but he did not for a moment believe that the lad had sold him.

What he really thought was the true solution to the mystery was that the boy had, by listening outside the Colonel's tent, gathered the object of the mission with which his master had been charged, and with that knowledge had also gleaned a very correct idea of the danger which must attend it—that he had stolen the despatch, and was now in hiding, with the ignorant idea that if it were not there to be taken, his master could not take it. That young Tom had actually set off from the Scarlet Lancers' camp to carry that paper across the five miles of difficult and dangerous country which lay between the two British camps was an idea which never entered for a moment into Bootles' calculations.

But his opinion was not shared by any one else—at least, no one else hit upon that idea as a solution of the mystery of Tom's conduct, and Bootles did not tell any one what he thought; he only stoutly maintained that he did not believe,

short of positive proof to the contrary, that the lad had sold him.

So that miserable morning dragged its slow length along. What a long, long day it was! The entire camp seemed paralysed by the loss of that paper, which had contained instructions for a simultaneous attack upon the city and the rebel forces on the third day from the date of sending the despatch. It was useless to send out a duplicate; for not only was the cypher probably already in the hands of Arabi, but the vigilance of the rebels would be greatly increased, and so render it impossible for a messenger to pass between the two British camps.

Towards evening, when the shades of night were gathering around, an attempt was made to signal to the other camp by means of electric lights. Hitherto their trials in this respect had been but dismal failures, and it was as a last resort that the Scarlet Lancers attempted it now.

To their intense surprise, however, the answering flashes came back with precision and evident understanding, very different from the confused answers they had received before. This time there could be no mistaking their meaning, and apparently those on the distant shore were experiencing the same enlightenment.

"*All right!—Got your message.—Will act as you direct.*"

The signalist put the message together, and the group of officers who were standing round him stood staring blankly into one another's faces, struck dumb with astonishment and surprise.

"Are you quite sure?" asked Hartog at length of the officer who was in charge of the signals.

The signalist—a very smart engineer—laughed.

"Yes. Quite sure," he answered.

"Then that boy carried the message to save Bootles!" Hartog exclaimed.

"B—y Jove!" ejaculated Lucy, "and I've been vigorously blackening the poor little devil's chawracter al—l day—evewry time I had a chance. I—er—feel beastly ashamed of myself."

"Ask again—ask who took the message, and if he is there now?" suggested Hartog to the engineer, who complied willingly enough and sent the inquiry flashing across the rapidly darkening sky, in which the brilliant stars were beginning to shine out one by one.

Then the reply came back in a series of vivid flashes.

"*A boy left camp on return journey with reply before daybreak.*"

"Then the rebels have got him!" Hartog cried, excitedly. "Poor little chap! they've got him, sure enough."

The news spread through the camp in next to no time, and, within half-an-hour, young Houp-La

had as many good words spoken for him as during the day he had had bad ones. Everybody had something pleasant to say in favour of the brave little lad, who had thus heroically risked his life, and, poor fellow, had probably already lost it, for the sake of the master whom he loved with the fidelity of a dog.

As for his master, he went straight to the Colonel and asked, with a strange huskiness in his throat and a blaze in his blue eyes, that a searching party might be sent out at once, and as far as was safe, in case the lad had been disabled, and could not reach the camp.

"Certainly, certainly; and go yourself, if you care to do it, Ferrers," said the Colonel, hurriedly, brushing his hand across his eyes. "Go yourself, if you care to do it. I have much pleasure in returning your sword. I am sure I sincerely hope the lad has come to no harm. 'Pon my soul, he is the hero of the campaign—'pon my soul, he is," and then the kindly Colonel shook his favourite by the hand, and brushed the other across his eyes once more.

Bootles said, "Thank you, sir," and went out without another word, chiefly because there was a lump in his throat which made speech difficult.

CHAPTER VIII.

"GOD BLESS HIM!"

IT was not long before a party was ready to start, with Bootles at its head, to search for the missing boy. Nor was it very long before they found him—perhaps a mile from the rebel outposts—lying behind a clump of trees, faint and ghastly pale, his mouth parched and dry, and his sharp, young face drawn and distorted with pain.

Bootles was the first to hear his moan and turned the light of the bull's-eye he carried upon the place whence the sound came. In another moment he was down upon his knees beside the prostrate form of the half-unconscious boy.

Young Houp-La vaguely recognized his master as he tenderly raised his head upon his arm.

"*Water!*" he gasped painfully.

Bootles filled the cup which formed the lower half of his flask with water, which one of the searchers had brought, and held it to the poor parched lips. It seemed to put new life into him, for he lifted his head and looked wildly round.

"Tell the Capt'n I got there safe. The answer is in my wes'coat pocket. I couldn't get back as well. One o' them Arab devils potted me, I crawled as far's I could, but I couldn't get no farther, though I see the camp lights jes' ahead." Then he perceived that Bootles was bending down over him, his kind face convulsed with grief and emotion.

"Is that you, sir" he said, in a tone of gentle relief and satisfaction. "Don't take on about me, sir; I ain't worth it."

"Where are you hurt, my boy?" Bootles asked in a choking voice.

"Somewhere about the groin, sir. It's no use trying to move me," seeing that two of the men had opened a stout blanket and were preparing to receive him. "It's all over with me now. Don't you put yourself out about me, sir, I ain't worth it."

"Try and drink a drop of this," said Bootles, holding the cup once more to his lips. It had brandy in it this time.

"It ain't no good, sir," he persisted, but he swallowed the brandy and water, and then they raised him very gently and lifted him on to the rug. Not so gently, though, but that he groaned and moaned piteously with the pain, and slipped off into delirium again, talking wildly all the way back to camp of the success of his expedition, and

"AND THEY RAISED HIM VERY GENTLY."

how the commanding officer of the other camp, who had received the despatch from him, had patted him on the shoulder and had called him a brave lad, and bade him God speed and a safe return.

And then, when at last they got him into camp and on to an ambulance cot, he came to his own senses again for a little time, and bade them send for the Colonel that he might give the despatch into his own hands.

"You're not angry, sir?" he said, imploringly, as the Colonel took the paper. "I knew the Capt'n couldn't go safe where I could, and I thought as 'ow it wouldn't matter so much if aught happened to me. You're not angry with me, are you, sir?"

"No, my boy, certainly not," answered the Colonel, huskily. "You are the bravest lad in the army. I am proud of you—very proud."

Tom Snow drew himself up as straightly as he could against his master's breast, where he had been lying ever since they put him down upon the bed, and endeavoured to salute the commanding officer. "I got there," he said, looking round at the faces about him, "and I got back 'ome again. It don't any of it matter now," and then he slipped off again and wandered on about the heat and the glare of the sunshine, of his awful thirst, and the pain of his wound. At last he tried to turn his head round to look at Bootles.

"Are you there, sir?" he asked, in a clear and sensible voice.

"Yes, my boy," answered Bootles, pressing the lad's head against his cheek, and holding him quite tight against his heart, as if he could not bear to let the all-powerful enemy, who was fast stealing upon them, wrest that faithful young life away from him.

"You'll tell the mistress as I kep' my word and took care of you, sir?" anxiously.

A great knot gathered in Bootles' throat, as if all his kind heart had crept up there and was choking him; a wave of emotion swept over his broad chest, causing the lad's heavy head to be perceptibly moved as it rested there. Speak he could not, and it was young Tom, the dying hero, who spoke next.

"Now, don't take on, sir," he said gently, "I've had my day. It's nigh on three years since you took me into the regiment, and I've had a *good* time. But it's over now and you're safe, so naught else matters——"

There was a moment's pause, then the weak, faint voice went on again: "And may-be little Missy 'll look after the cat?"

"Yes," said Bootles; "I'll tell her."

"I suppose I 'ad a father and a mother once, like other lads," the boy continued, half wandering again; "but you've been father and mother both,

sir. Aye, but there's nobody like the Capt'n, and I never disobeyed a order he give me until I chucked that 'ere flask away. But the Capt'n knows—he knows as 'ow I did it for the best; and the mistress 'll know as I kep' my word, and so naught else matters now——"

"I wish the mistress were here now, my boy," Bootles burst out; "she would thank you as I cannot do, and comfort you as I don't know how."

"A'ter you, sir;—the mistress is the mistress," young Tom replied; "but a'ter you."

The minutes passed slowly away and intense silence reigned throughout the tent; suddenly Tom spoke again:—

"I ain't in no pain now, sir," he said with a satisfied sigh; "but I'm orful tired."

"Try and sleep a little," said Bootles.

"Yes; I think I'll try. I'm orful tired."

Then there was silence again—a silence longer, deeper, more profound than that which had been before—broken, indeed, only by the sound of the boy's sharp-drawn breath. Then that, too, grew fainter and less laboured, and Bootles held the slight form yet closer in his arms—held it till the last faint sigh had fluttered through the whitened lips—held it, even though he knew perfectly well that the brave hero-soul had slipped away—held it closer and closer still, because he did not dare to look on the brave white face which had been

faithful even to the very end, and had paid a debt of gratitude even by the sacrifice of his life.

It was Lucy who approached him first.

"You'd better come away now, Bootles, old fellow," he said, persuasively. "You can't do the poor little chap any good now."

Bootles allowed one of the doctors to unfold his arms and take the little body from him. Then he stood up and looked down upon it as it lay still and silent upon the bed, the sharp, young face at rest and peaceful now.

"I knew he hadn't sold me," he said in a shaking voice. "God bless him! he loved me better than himself;" and then he turned away and strode out into the darkness alone.

THE END.

North Berwick, August 1885.

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